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11-26-2016

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Recommended Citation

Arango, A. (2016). Husserl's Concept of Position-taking and Second Nature. *Phenomenology and Mind*, (6), 168–176. https://doi.org/10.13128/Phe_Mi-19561

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HUSSERL'S CONCEPT OF POSITION-TAKING AND SECOND NATURE

abstract

*I argue that Husserl's concept of position taking, *Stellungnahme*, is adequate to understand the idea of second nature as an issue of philosophical anthropology. I claim that the methodological focus must be the living subject that acts and lives among others, and that the notion of second nature must respond to precisely this fundamental active character of subjectivity. The appropriate concept should satisfy two additional desiderata. First, it should be able to develop alongside the biological, psychological, and social individual development. Second, it should be able to underlie the vast diversity of human beings within and across communities. As possible candidates, I contrast position taking with two types of habit like concepts: instinct and habitus, on the one hand, and customary habits, on the other. I argue that position taking represents the active aspect of the subject while the habit like concepts are passive. A subject's position takings and ensuing comportments are tied together by motivations, which evince a certain consistency, and for this reason are expression of the subject's identity. I conclude by nuancing the relation between *Stellungnahme* and passivity. Passivity is deemed necessary to action but subservient to it; position taking is thought to be prior to passivity.*

keywords

Second nature, position taking, Husserl, habit, subjectivity

This paper argues that Husserl's concept of position-taking, *Stellungnahme*, specifically as developed in *Ideas II*, is adequate to understand the idea of second nature as an issue of a philosophical anthropology¹. Inter- and intra-cultural diversity among individuals and groups, as well as transhistorical variation in human activities, institutions, accomplishments, and even personal characteristics (all of which we take to be telling of who we are), give us reasons to think that our *nature* goes beyond our species-common biological nature. It seems then that *what we are* is not limited to our biological, *first* nature. But what goes beyond *first* nature is not, as I will show, separate from it: they both make up our second nature. How to think more concretely about this unity/duality? I argue that *what we are* is manifest in a particular way in the diversity and complexity of human activities. In thinking about second nature, my interest will be to try to get some clarity about the *level* in which it is possible to locate the union of both a biologically and a non-biological aspect at work in the historically-situated everyday life of human beings, who are social in nature, and to articulate that connection. In everyday life the subject's acts are not isolated peaks². Actions belong together in two senses: they express a certain internal consistency in their motivations and they issue from the same subject. Thus, second nature is looked for in that which connects the sequences of motivations that underlie a person's doings. This connection I identify as dispositional. Position-taking or *Stellungnahme*, I hold, is the right dispositional concept to articulate the notion of second nature.

1 Husserl's works are referenced according to the Husserliana edition, save for *Experience and Judgment*. Non-enclosed numbers correspond to the English translation cited; page numbers of the German edition are given within angle brackets, where available.

2 I use the terms "subject" and "person" synonymously. They refer to the actual being that is essentially embodied and historical and has an intersubjective dimension. I use sometimes "living subject" for emphasis. My referent is not the pure or transcendental ego (save as a stratum in the multilayered constitution of the subject). My commitment to such a conception of the subject, among other things, puts me apart from a number of Husserl commentators that insist that Husserl accounts first and foremost for a transcendental consciousness as the essence of subjectivity. It also distinguishes my account from recent influential investigations, such as Crowell's recent book (2013), who argues that while Husserl may have seen the necessity to account for a richer subject, in the manner above described, his theoretical commitments rendered him unable to accomplish such project. To put it in Crowell's terms, the type of normativity that is manifest in the pragmatically-embedded life of the subject is beyond the reach of Husserl's phenomenology. I oppose such reading. This paper can be seen as an argument for the presence of such type of normativity in the Husserl.

It conveys the idea that in everyday life a subject does not simply face pre-given things in a pre-given way. Rather, she *orients* herself in relation to things, people, states of affairs, etc. This orienting herself is broad in its operation as it ranges from *basic* levels (e.g. sensory acquaintance with things) all the way up to complex activities, and is always and preeminently active. Since it has been the explicit aim of this special issue—*Habits: Second Nature and Social Reality*—to invite accounts of *habit*, my paper has the intention of offering a counterpart to positions positively centered on that concept.

In §1 I argue that since the concept of motivation is at the core of the phenomenological and ontological priority of active subjectivity that Husserl endorses in *Ideas II*, and motivations can be understood as dispositions, the issue of second nature can be framed in terms of the appropriate dispositional concept. I then offer a list of desiderata for the right dispositional concept, and define and locate two groups of habit-like concepts in relation to those desiderata. In §2 I offer an account of *Stellungnahme*. In doing so, I offer arguments for the primacy of active subjectivity, and for the connections *Stellungnahme-motivation* and, issuing from it, *Stellungnahme-identity*. In §3 I clarify my stance on position-taking and passivity arguing that position-taking has phenomenological and epistemological priority over passivity. I do not identify position-taking with the whole sphere of activity and I do not discount that there are passive bases, both innate and acquired, that are essential to position-taking.

1. Husserl conceives the living subject in its everyday concreteness as the subject that acts, judges, perceives, makes decisions, desires, etc. On this view, the subject is *constituted* by a series of layers or strata. Her actions are *motivated*, that is, they are animated by influences of different sorts: needs of pragmatic engagements with things or people, value considerations, and also biological drives and instincts, and psychic rigid habits that we have acquired.

Our second nature is manifest in our active life, but it is rooted in the biological and in the habitual (Hua 4, 267, <255>). In speaking of the underlying basis of the subject, Husserl says that “in a certain sense there is, in the obscure depths, a root soil” (Hua 4, 291–292, <279>)³. The metaphor points to a hidden ground that is difficult to investigate not only because it is beyond the reach of our awareness, but also because it is deep and its elements are buried. Despite this obscurity, it is essential to the

3 “Es ist gewissermaßen ein Wurzelboden da in dunklen Tiefen” (Hua 4, <279>). See also Supplement XII to Hua 4.

account I offer to see everyday actions as grounded in such multilayered substrate. Although I address second nature through an active concept, the partly passive, underlying sphere must be kept in sight, so that my account is sensitive to the complexity of the subject matter and proves to be compatible with and answerable to the ground on which it is rooted. Husserl's theory of constitution provides a way to investigate the issue of second nature, for it looks for the structure of lived experiences through an inquiry into the *constitution* of the experiencing subject. Before I get there, I would like to propose some criteria to guide the inquiry.

At the core of the active subject are complexes of dispositions, product of physiological and biological dependencies, and of earlier experiences (Hua 4, 143, <136>), and this is why the question of second nature should be framed as an investigation into the most adequate dispositional concept. The right dispositional concept should satisfy two groups of desiderata. First, there is an ontogenetic aspect: the right dispositional structure should be able to *change* alongside biological, personal, and social individual development. A second group relates to variations between different subjects: the right dispositional structure should be plastic enough so as to adapt to biological differences between human beings, including those of subjects with disabilities, and to underlie cultural and intersubjective variations of humans, such as languages and modes of relating to the world affectively, cognitively, or in value terms.

Husserl's mid-to-late philosophy accords an increasing importance to passive structures and processes, habit being their chief representative, so it is just natural to consider them in the present discussion. The idea of habit is, in quite general terms, the idea that some aspects of our experiential engagement with the world become habitual and *ground* our experiential life in general. While I agree that the domain of passivity does play a central role in our experiential life, I do not think that it is the right concept to be at the center of a philosophical anthropology. Let me explore two habit-like formations.

On one extreme we have hard, biologically-based *instincts* and *habitus*, that is, sedimented (sometimes thickly sedimented) cognitive or affective *opinions* (Hua 4, 267, <255>). *Habitus* refers to a type of *knowledge* constituting a horizon of "familiarity and precognition" that, by means of a certain anticipation, underlies the objects' coming to be experienced as they actually are experienced (Experience and Judgment, 121-123). In other words, *habitus* is "a residue of past life that informs the current perceptions, thought and actions of the ego" (Biceaga 2010, 68; see also Hua 4, 118, <111>). In the process of the explicative thematization of an object,

for instance, this sedimented knowledge is responsible for assigning (or awakening) a sense to different aspects of the object as it is given in time (Experience and Judgment, 112–124). The origin of habitus is the repetition of similar instances that fixes a sense and makes it become latent in cognitive and belief expectation (Hua 11, 238–241, <188–191>).

Instinct and habitus are passive even when they play a role in activities. Instincts and bodily-based habitualities (e.g. being raised as right-handed even if one 'is' left-handed) are closer to pure passivity (Biceaga 2010, 68). But even more complex cases of habitus—say habitus at play in recognizing a social dynamic—are passive because the person, without much resistance, 'accepts' what is suggested by habitus. The fact that we can 'fight' or 'overcome' some of these 'suggestions' (perhaps not the instinctual ones), and on occasion intendedly yield to them, only shows that it is possible to more actively relate to them, not that they are not passive.

On other extreme we have customary habits: having a coffee in the morning, crossing one's arms, putting too much salt in food, etc. Although *habits* are evidence of our second nature in that, for instance, they are not instinctual and can vary from culture to culture and from person to person, they are too concrete and specific, and for that reason are not the type of concept we are after. It should be possible, though, to account for them through the right concept.

It does not seem then that either instincts and habitus, or customary habits are the concepts that can successfully articulate the idea of second. Even when closely woven into action, "the ego's participation [...] is usually minimal and removed from introspective reach" (Biceaga 2010, 69).

Methodologically these passive formations can help delimit the dispositional concept I am after. We can think that the right dispositional concept should be in between these two extremes: the passive formations that underlie our acquaintance with objects (instincts and habitus), and specific repetitive behaviors (habits) that, while a form of activity, are more like end-products or peaks of action, in which the subject yields to fixed ways of doing things. As to habits, in addition to minimal participation and lack of introspection, they are not productive in the sense a structure of subjectivity would be and are all-too-specific to be the concepts we are looking for: habits do not underlie the wide variety of activities of which they themselves are but instances.

In the next section I will offer an account of position-taking as the most adequate dispositional concept to understand the second nature of persons.

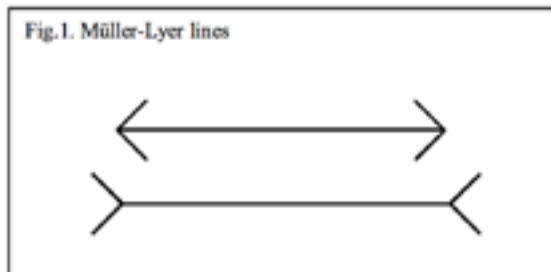
2. The notion of position-taking conveys the idea that in everyday life a subject does not simply face pre-given things in a pre-given way and executes pre-delineated actions upon them. Rather, she first and foremost orients herself in relation to things, others, states of affairs, etc. The general orientation that precedes and gives rise to the situation, and guides the moments of explicit action is a taking of position. Position-taking sets the tone, as it were, for the essentially interpretive acquaintance between subject and things, on which the very definition or thematization of those things depends, and it maintains or changes that tone in ensuing comportments. In this sense, it has a broad range of action. The concept of position-taking is also broad in that it applies to different domains of acquaintance with things (sensory, perceptually, logically, affectively, inferentially, etc.).
- Say I am walking in the street and there is a car parked near me. I may notice the car or not. I may only notice the presence of a big object without thematizing it as a car. If I notice it, I may notice it in many ways: noticing its color or not, noticing where it is exactly parked, etc. My way of noticing it or not somehow depends on what I am doing: perhaps I am rushing to get somewhere and my surroundings are not something I have an interest in, except for the purposes of efficiency. My level of awareness of the car is also related to my pragmatic engagement with it: if I barely notice the bulk I may be able to avoid it (and vice versa too), and my noticing it without awareness of model or color may be enough for a more involved pragmatic relation, such as intently standing behind it while another car goes by. In all these cases, I take a position, even if only derivatively, in respect to the car. Thus, when I am in the vicinity of a car, it is not the case that I always encounter *a car as such*, with its many characteristics, and that my perceptions, actions and reactions about it can be defined objectively. This simplified scenario is the type of situation I have in mind.
- In inquiring about second nature, the explanandum is the second nature of the whole person, of “the subject of actual life” (Hua 4, Supplement XIII, 382-383, <372-373>). According to Husserl’s theory of constitution, chiefly as developed in *Ideas II*, the person is constituted by multiple levels. These levels are different Ego-formations, ranging (in broad strokes) from a bodily level, to the theoretical-transcendental pure Ego, to the empirical, intersubjective Ego of everyday life. Let me illustrate by focusing on two levels.
- The aesthetic body is a system that pairs sensory occurrences with subjective occurrences in the body, and in an important sense determines “what it is that, as world, stands over and against the subject” (Hua 4, 70-80, <65-75>). This corporeal self [*Ichleib*] has the particularity of being a

center of reference in relation to which perceptual happenings take place: perceived things are above, to the left, they are disgusting or agreeable, actable upon or not, etc. (Hua 4, 61, <56>; Hua 16, 1997, 124, <148>).

Another stratum is that of the “pure Ego”, achieved by self-reflection in abstraction from the body (Hua 4, 103, <97>). The pure Ego is the abstract intentional unity in which the same I-feeling is attached to the same flow of consciousness and that is common to all intentional acts.

These abstract formations are at work in the pragmatic involvement of subjects in the world. These strata do not ‘act’ isolatedly or modularly: the workings of the simpler, more basic strata are constitutive of the activities of ‘higher’, more comprehensive levels (Hua 4 Hua 4, 70–71, 269, 292–293 <66, 257, 280>). Let us take the case of perception as an illustration of different levels at work in the actual life of a subject.

Take, for instance, the Müller-Lyer (so-called) illusion (Fig.1). To this day, the Müller-Lyer lines are taken by most as evidence of a universal characteristic featuring both the representational character of perception and its modular character (one can’t see the lines of equal length despite knowing they are so). As some social psychologists have shown, however, there is nothing universal or necessary about the perception of the drawing. Some people, the San foragers of the Kalahari, do not see the illusion. Further, the differences in perceived length between the two lines varies across populations (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010, 62). According to the authors of this study, it may be that the exposure to “‘carpentered corners’ of modern environments may favor certain optical calibrations and visual habits that create and perpetuate this illusion” (2010, 62). Whether it is specifically the exposure to carpentered corners or other complex social influences, what is crucial here is that this case illustrates Husserl’s claim that the bodily dimension does not act in isolation but is influenced by intersubjective and pragmatic constraints. The perceptual element is not simply about what sensations *follow* what sensory worldly occurrences. It is about ways of encountering, taking in, and relating to worldly occurrences: it is a taking of position.



Husserl does not claim that the perceptual is the bodily dimension *alone*, but that the perceptual is *partly* constituted by the sensory, bodily level. Nor does Husserl claim, that the sensory or bodily is *only* biological or physiological. The workings of the body are active in meaningful perception, but personal and intersubjective strata also shape a person's sensitivity or even a person's way of 'using' the senses. I am now in the position to offer a fuller articulation of *position-taking*.

The subject is active, and being active means taking position vis-à-vis things, objects, goals, etc. (Hua 4, 226-238, <215-226>). For Husserl, the genuine sense of subjectivity belongs to the Ego that acts upon things, makes decisions about her life, perceives objects—that one who attends, compares, is attracted or repulsed, etc. (Hua 4, 224-225, <213>; Hua 11, 16-19, <362-364>). The subject that relates to things in the world is not a universal, abstract subject, but rather a being that is individualized in her own constitution as “a person among persons” (Hua 4, Suppl. XIII, 382, <372>). The person is, for these reasons, not conceived of as a substance in which properties or capacities inhere, but rather as an active being in which a complex underlying basis is in action and is made manifest in the way things are dealt with, as well as in the *things* that are dealt with. In exercising faculties and habits the subject takes position and determines relational *stances* regarding things (Hua 4, 265, <253>).

This position-taking of the person is the pragmatic *thematization* of a relation of the subject with aspects of the world (Hua 4, 119–120, <112–113>). This means that position-taking, as a relational structure of subjectivity, does not only refer to individual, isolated position-takings. There is a broader connection between position-takings and the subject, and the key is the notion of motivation: “My thesis, my position-taking, my deciding from motives [...] is something I have a stake in” (Hua 4, 119, <122>)⁴.

The causality of motivation is central for Husserl because the subjective relation with the surrounding world is not a causal relation, governed by causal, physical conditionalities, but one governed by the nexus of motivations, that is, by the type of animating power that guides the *meaningful, pragmatic* relation with things that intentional beings like us have. Husserl refers to motivation also as the “lawfulness of the life of the spirit” (Hua 4, 231, <220>). To say that lawfulness belongs to motivation means that there exists a certain agreement of motives, a type of *consistency*. We can see this consistency, for instance, in the character of a person. If, as I have said, the subject is an ongoing taking of position animated by

4 “Meine Thesis, meine Stellungnahme, mein auf die Motive hin Mich-entscheiden [...] ist meine Sache” (Hua 4 1989, <122>).

consistent motives, the identity of the subject is to be found precisely in *the* consistency evinced in her position-takings and comportments. In Husserl's terms, it is part of the idea of a subject that the subject is the same in all her position-takings, and that in all her position-takings the subject is the same: "As long as I am the one I am, then the position-taking cannot but 'persist', and I cannot but persist in it" (Hua 4, 118–119, <111–112>).

In this case, to say that the identity of the subject is to be found in her consistent position-takings and ensuing comportments means that such position-takings are *expression* of herself (Flynn 2009, 67). The whole person, as a psychophysical unit that exists over time, expresses herself in the bodily, active, ongoing engagement with things in the world. The subject *is*, as a *subject*, nothing else than her position-takings and ensuing comportments. We may say that we find *in a person* a style of being, a mode of acting, a host of tendencies and preferences. We should rather say that it is *in* those things—in her position-takings—where we find the person⁵. This is not to say, though, that in a changing stream of consciousness and lived experiences, the subject is ever fully defined. Husserl says that "the subject develops by living" (Hua 4, 264, <252>), which means that it is more precise to speak of an ongoing, interactive correlation between subject and activities, such that the subject determines those activities and is at the same time influenced and further shaped by those activities themselves (see Hua 4, Supplements VII, X).

It follows also from this framework that the identity of a subject is not strictly an individual issue. Insofar as position-taking features ways of relating towards things, others, and events, and those ways come oftentimes from others (e.g. upbringing and cultural ways of doing things), *Stellungnahme* is partly intersubjectively constituted. Personal character and style are then partly constituted by others, and in this sense Husserl says that "this influence determines personal development, whether or not the person himself subsequently realizes it, remembers it, or is capable

5 Husserl's two main conceptions of expression and the shift from one to the other, from the *Investigations to Ideas II*, are explored in detail by Flynn (2009). On the early conception, modeled after the linguistic sign, expression operates with two separate things, one of which expresses the other, the expressed being the essential one. In contrast, the view Husserl endorses in *Ideas II* talks about an *intimation* between a subjective aspect and a bodily manifestation, that is, so 'close' a connection that it is not the case that interiority is expressed in exteriority, but that the "interiority" *coexists* with "exteriority" (68). The body does not simply indicate subjective states because, first, the body itself is not just materiality—it is not *Körper* but *Leib*, living body—, and second, because the body itself in its being animated—or the subjective aspects being embodied—constitutes a type of unity that only exists in that intimation, which is in this case *the human being herself* as a particular type of reality (67). The extension I propose of the treatment Flynn offers of exteriority and body is that they are properly nowhere to be 'seen' or intuited but in position-takings and ensuing comportments.

of determining the degree of the influence and its character” (Hua 4, 281, <268>)⁶. In the following section I will offer a few closing remarks nuancing the relation between position-taking and passivity.

3. My argument for *Stellungnahme* rests on the consideration that the person is essentially active: it is “the [personal] Ego that in any sense is “active” and *takes a position*” (Hua 4, 225, <213>). On that basis I argue that the active position-taking has priority over passivity, and that this priority is phenomenological and epistemological. Passivity, embodied in instinct, habitus and habit, is necessary for subjectivity to take place, but is subservient to position-takings⁷.

Husserl examines the relation between passive and active aspects in the *Analyses* and says that despite the central role of passivity, consciousness of objects is “*genuinely* carried out only *first* in egoic acts” (Hua 11, 274, <3>, emphasizes mine). Position-taking is phenomenologically prior to passivity because it pertains to first-person experience, where *meaning* is located; whereas other underlying strata, subpersonal or unconscious, are not meaningful in the first-person sense. Epistemologically, position-taking is prior to passivity because first-person experience is the proper source of knowledge and is also known first and more directly; whereas underlying strata are only known indirectly (some only transcendently) as they reveal themselves in first-person experience.

Position-taking cannot exist without the passive sphere. The subject that acts—that perceives, grasps, remembers, values, etc.—possesses, as it were, a passive ground that makes it possible, in the most fundamental sense,

6 My proposal is broadly compatible with scientific accounts of the origins of human cognition such as Tomasello’s (2009). On his view, human cognition is the product of a *historical and ontogenetical* development of cognitive skills on the basis of a set of *phylogenetic* characteristics (2009, 10–12).

7 My account of position-takings is *not* an account of the sphere of activity. There is a good reason: there are specific activities that are passive in the relevant sense, which is a certain deciding freely according to motives. When trying to suggest a relativization and softening of the relation activity/passivity, Biceaga argues, for instance, that receptivity is a type of “activity in passivity” which defies the opposition between “passive receptivity as the ego’s *undergoing of something* and judicative activity as the ego’s *doing something* in response to its being passively affected from without” (2010, xix, emphasis in the original). Thoroughly habitual doings are actions in the obvious sense that the body moves, but they are entirely passive in that the free ego, as it were, hardly intervenes and the action is beyond introspection and even perhaps beyond awareness.

On the other hand, position-taking is not a simple voluntaristic account of actions. In the course, for instance, of a time-extended pragmatic endeavor in which one interacts with several objects for the sake of the whole, like cooking a meal, position-taking refers more to the whole, and the way specific interactions are part of that whole orientation—consistency of motivations—rather than to each individual engagement with an object. This is why the issue of *wanting* to do each individual action is relatively unimportant, and why ‘activity’ in the traditional conception of ‘what is done’ is entirely flat-footed, even inadequate, for the present purposes. Nevertheless, it is clear that the whole pragmatic engagement is *active*.

for objects to be objects for consciousness. In a way, the passive sphere is active in the being active of the subject, and this also shows that “activity and passivity are inseparable and mutually dependent” (Biceaga 2010, 2010, xix).

Addressing this complex relation, Husserl writes:

[The fullness of the person is] the Ego as human, the ‘I take a position’, the I think, I value, I act, I complete works, etc. Then there also belongs to me a *basis of lived experiences* and a *basis of nature* (“my nature”) which is manifest in the play of lived experiences. This nature is the lower psychic layer, but it extends even into the sphere of position taking: the position-taking Ego is dependent on its substratum insofar as I, in order to be motivated in my position taking, must have precisely the motivating lived experiences, which stand in an associative nexus and under rules of associative dispositions. (Hua 4, 293, <280>)

I would like to finish by going back to the botanic metaphor I invoked at the beginning of §1, in which Husserl referred to the lower levels on which position-taking depends as the obscure depths of roots. There lie the underlying bases, biological and habitual, of the life of the person. I would like to suggest now that the metaphor is not a mere illustration but a genuine way of understanding the complexity of human beings in the constitutional sense. The power of the metaphor has been felt by more than one philosopher. Buber spoke of the spirit as nature’s blossom. In his *Gay Science*, Nietzsche says “Like trees we grow – it’s hard to understand, like all life! – not in one place, but everywhere; not in one direction, but upwards and outwards and inwards and downwards equally; our energy drives trunk, branches, and roots all at once” (2001, §371, 236). Nietzsche’s metaphor supplements Husserl’s reference to a deep root soil. The relation between roots and trunk and branches is not only one of groundedness, but also one of productive development. Trunk and branches also exert pressure downwards and drive the roots to new developments, and those new root-configurations becomes renewed ground for even the highest of leaves.

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