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Greco-Roman Ethics and the Naturalistic Fantasy

*By Brooke Holmes**

ABSTRACT

To modern scholars, the naturalistic fallacy looks out of place in Greco-Roman antiquity owing to the robust associations between nature, especially human nature, and moral norms. Yet nature was understood by ancient authors not only as a norm but also as a form of necessity. The Greco-Roman philosophical schools grappled with how to reconcile the idea that human nature is given with the idea that it is a goal to be reached. This essay looks at the Stoic concept of *oikeiōsis* as one strategy for effecting such a reconciliation. Drawing on natural history, these Stoic sources used examples of animal behavior to illustrate a process whereby nature “entrusts” all animals, including humans, with the care of their own survival. Nature is thus both what is given to the animal and what the animal achieves in a powerful but also problematic synthesis here called the “naturalistic fantasy.”

THE NATURALISTIC FALLACY is, by all accounts, alien to ancient Greco-Roman ethics.¹ The major philosophical schools that develop after Aristotle in the late fourth century B.C.E. through to the early centuries C.E. were nothing if not quarrelsome, but they virtually all agreed that the point of our lives is to live in agreement or accordance with nature. The Hellenistic fascination with nature as normative was hardly novel. From at least as early as Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, in the late eighth century B.C.E., the natural world was available as a repository of values and models for human behavior in Greek literature and philosophy.² The development of philosophical ethics through Plato and Aristotle to the Stoics and the Epicureans looks like an extension of this orientation toward nature. If nature is seen to be synonymous with virtue, rather than being roped off as a domain to which ethics may or may not be reduced, then the idea that it is illegitimate to

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¹ See esp. the discussion in Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), p. 135; see also Lorraine Daston, “The Naturalistic Fallacy Is Modern,” in this Focus section.

² Laura Slatkin, “Measuring Authority, Authoritative Measures: Hesiod’s *Works and Days*,” in *The Moral Authority of Nature*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 21–49.

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pass from “is” to “ought”—one convenient modern shorthand for the naturalistic fallacy—has no purchase.

We are right to be wary of straitjacketing ancient Greco-Roman approaches to nature and ethics into the terms of relatively recent debates, not only as historians but also as interested participants in contemporary debates about nature and value. But there is a risk, too, that in our enthusiasm for radical historicization we cut ourselves off from a “premodern” past too abruptly, a risk felt all the more acutely as the horizon of interest in the past has moved steadily closer to the present. Ancient Greek and Roman sources offer more than a counterexample to our reflections on the sprawling modern debates fueled by the naturalistic fallacy and its immediate antecedents. Already in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. we find tensions between different accounts of nature and the cosmos among early generations of natural philosophers (*physikoi*). The impression of seamless continuity from Hesiod to the Stoics is, then, an illusion. Rather, once explicit concepts of “nature” and “body” began to take shape in antiquity, different understandings of nature developed through the give-and-take of philosophical debate.³ Plato and Aristotle responded in their own ways to what they framed as the limited materialism of the earlier, “Presocratic” cosmologies, stressing the order, rationality, and goodness of nature, principles that became especially pronounced in Stoicism (which is, it is worth stressing, a highly materialist philosophy in the strict sense). The Epicureans self-consciously elaborated an alternative materialist position, emphasizing the emergence of regularity from chaos and the indifference of nature to human ends.

Ancient physics was, then, in many ways a battle between the “bottom-up” atomists and the “top-down” approach best exemplified by Stoicism but endorsed more widely—Galen speaks of two “sects” in natural philosophy. This means that the familiar opposition of (teleological, moralizing) ancients and (hard-nosed, materialist) moderns is not just partial but misleading (not least because it cannot account for the persistence of the “error” ostensibly identified by the naturalistic fallacy).⁴ We would do better to recognize that as concepts like “nature” and “body” emerge, they initiate an oppositional logic already in antiquity. That is to say, these concepts help generate predominantly materialist models of explanation while also giving rise to backlashes against such models, backlashes that home in on the apparent order and regularity of nature, the self-perpetuation of life, and the complexity of human (and sometimes animal) behavior. Ancient natural philosophy has its own specificities and quirks. But the philosophical battles about the nature of nature that we see in antiquity will be played out time and again in Western philosophy and science.⁵ The core problems at the heart of debates about the naturalistic fallacy are not new.

The oppositional logic of the two “sects” Galen described comes in part from tensions within the concept of nature. For nature could encompass both what is given and necessary, on the one hand, and an ideal to be achieved, on the other hand. The

³ On “nature” a good starting point is G. E. R. Lloyd, “The Invention of Nature,” in *Methods and Problems in Greek Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 417–434. See also, e.g., Felix Heinemann, *Nomos und Physis: Herkunft und Bedeutung einer Antithese im griechischen Denken des 5. Jahrhunderts* (Basel: Reinhardt, 1965); and Gerard Naddaf, *The Greek Concept of Nature* (Albany: State Univ. New York Press, 2005). On “body” see Brooke Holmes, *The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010).

⁴ Galen, *On the Natural Faculties* 1.12 (2.27 Kühn=120.14–21 Helmreich).

⁵ Witness, e.g., the debates swirling around Thomas Nagel’s most recent book, *Mind and Cosmos*; see Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012).

twofold nature of nature means that variants of naturalism, whether inclined toward one aspect of nature or another, have an instability at their core. In the ethical theories of the Hellenistic period, where the major schools converged on the idea of living in agreement (or accordance) with nature as the *telos* (“end” or “aim”) of human life, nature appears to be both an “is” and an “ought.”⁶ Herein lies the problem. Why do human beings have to try to follow nature if nature is given? Why do they fail in this aim?

The difficulty is especially clear in Stoic ethics. Nature, for the Stoics, is resolutely normative. Yet living in agreement with nature is not at all normal: the sage, the Stoics believed, is as rare as the phoenix. And yet they also argued that we come into the world, as all animals do, “entrusted” to ourselves by nature, programmed, as it were, to fulfill our needs. The Stoics labeled this process “*oikeiōsis*.” In this essay, I use the concept of *oikeiōsis* to sketch out one ancient strategy for reconciling the two sides of nature: as given, on the one hand, and achieved, on the other. I call this strategy a “naturalistic fantasy.” The fantasy, more specifically, is that animals can live in perfect accordance with nature (because their relationship to themselves is given by nature) without being mere vehicles for nature, as plants are. The idea of *oikeiōsis* is therefore premised on a kind of fold within animal nature, through which the animal acts on its own behalf.

It is no accident that we are speaking here of animals, rather than human beings. While *oikeiōsis* describes a process that forms the infant and remains the model for the ethical ideal of the sage, it is best illustrated by means of (other) animals. That will hardly come as a surprise to most historians of science in light of the pride of place occupied by animals in later variants on a naturalistic ethics, the bonobos and bees that make cameo appearances in the other essays gathered here. The bias toward natural history evident in this essay is a testament in part to how difficult it seems to have been for the Stoics to imagine how reason recreates the ostensible givenness of nature’s good at the pinnacle of human life—that is, at the point when a life becomes properly human. Animals therefore played an important role in elucidating ethical naturalism at the highest level. The problem of proving what nature wants of us *qua* developed human beings is of course one that still haunts the borderlands between nature and ethics. By taking a closer look at the strange and distant concept of *oikeiōsis*, we gain an unexpected angle on the impulse in naturalism to close the gap between nature and what is right or good and the persistent difficulty of doing so.

* * *

Before turning to *oikeiōsis* in more detail, I want to say a few more words about the tensions I mentioned above within the tradition of natural philosophy first in Greece, then in Rome. It is true that what Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal have called “the moral authority of nature” was firmly entrenched in Greco-Roman antiquity. But from the late fifth century B.C.E., that authority was seen as something that had to be defended against models of the cosmos allegedly organized by necessity and a nature blind to value. In Euripides’ *Phoenician Women*, Jocasta appeals to her son Eteocles to yield the kingship of Thebes to his brother Polyneices by invoking the Equality that governs night and day

⁶ On the distinction between living “in accordance with nature” (*kata physin*) and living “in agreement with nature” (*homologoumenōs tēi phusei zēn*) see Gisela Striker, “Following Nature: A Study in Stoic Ethics,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1991, 9:1–73, esp. pp. 4–5, including nn. 3 and 4.

as well as human affairs.⁷ She articulates that argument, however, in response to an Eteocles cast as a freethinking, *enfant terrible* tyrant in the mold of Platonic characters such as Callicles and Thrasymachus. He is arguing that principles such as fairness and equality have no independent existence outside of language or custom.

Of course, Eteocles is also making a claim about the world that has implications for what he should do—namely, that equality is a conventional fiction with no claim on him.⁸ Indeed, the debate was less about whether the nature of the world is a resource for thinking about human nature or ethical action and more about what the world is like and what that means for human beings. Is the cosmos ruled by nothing but chance, necessity, and the law of force, or by order, harmony, mind, and the good? What are the implications of these large-scale principles for how human beings live their lives? The cosmic perspective remained deeply relevant to ethics in the Hellenistic and Roman schools, where ethics was only one leg of a triangle that also included physics and logic.⁹ Yet seeing physics as relevant to ethics did not necessarily mean that one believed the cosmos is imbued with values to be mimicked by human beings or is solicitous of their well-being. For the Epicureans, a materialist physics was integral to an ethics in which reason is an instrument for isolating the soul from the turbulence of matter.

Nevertheless, however indifferent nature as a whole was to human beings in Epicureanism, human nature loomed large as a norm in Epicurean ethics, much as in the other Hellenistic philosophical traditions. The point of contention among the Hellenistic schools turned, rather, on what we are by nature, on what nature wants of us. The fact that there was so much room for debate suggests a lack of transparency in our relationship to nature that mirrors the epistemological challenge of grasping the nature of the cosmos. Yet the very fact of dissent also raises new difficulties. How can we be blind to who or what we really are? Why does knowledge even come into play? If our natures define us, how can we *not* live according to nature? In the *Phoenician Women*, Eteocles is being urged to honor Equality, where honoring is an action that one chooses after looking to the world that lies outside the self. But how is it that we choose to live out our own natures?

In early inquiries into human nature in the fifth century B.C.E., most notably by the medical writers of the Hippocratic Corpus, the nature in human nature lay closer to what is given. In a famous passage from the Hippocratic treatise *Epidemics VI*, for example, nature is “untaught.”¹⁰ Yet human nature was also seen as dynamic, embedded in a constantly changing environment and subject to a wide variety of foods and practices. These external influences hold the capacity to destabilize the material conditions that allow human nature to flourish. For all the givenness of nature, then, flourishing also requires the management of rational subjects—doctors, but also informed patients. The dynamism of human nature, and especially its tendency toward decline, turned the care and cultivation of nature into an ethical imperative.

The human nature of early medical writing was on the whole physiological, grounded in the body, its types of matter and its forces. Toward the end of the fifth century we begin

⁷ Daston and Vidal, eds., *Moral Authority of Nature* (cit. n. 2); and Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 499–548.

⁸ According to another version of this line of argument, what is “naturally” (*kata physin*) good and just is for the strong to follow their desires and not be ruled by the weak (Plato, *Gorgias* 492a).

⁹ There is some debate as to how cosmic nature becomes relevant in Stoicism. See esp. Striker, “Following Nature” (cit. n. 6); and the counterposition articulated in Annas, *Morality of Happiness* (cit. n. 1), pp. 159–179. See also Gabor Betegh, “Cosmological Ethics in the *Timaeus* and Early Stoicism,” *Oxford Stud. Ancient Phil.*, 2003, 24:273–302.

¹⁰ [Hippocrates], *Epidemics VI* 5.1 (Littré 5.314=100.8–102.2 Manetti-Roselli).

to see attempts to develop a care of the soul that were often modeled on a medical therapeutics.¹¹ The medical analogy in early ethics had ramifications for the variants of naturalism that develop later. On the one hand, it classified the life of human beings among other forms of life (animal, plant) susceptible to perversion and corruption and cast all the ways in which that life goes wrong as diseases. On the other hand, in a privileged example of the oppositional logic that I mentioned earlier, the analogy drew a line between the flourishing of the body and the flourishing of the soul and between living and living well.

The domain of the soul was defined in part by ethical agency. From Aristotle on, there was talk of what is “up to us,” as opposed to the physical forces that act on us through necessity. It is within the space of what is “up to us” that human beings enable their natures to flourish or become complicit in degeneration and perversion.¹² That we contribute to the expression of our natures as either true to form or pathological, and that we do so in a manner that is neither unthought nor indeliberate, is precisely why we need to be equipped with some sense of how we ought to live. Ethics met that need.

Yet how can we know how we ought to live? Here is where untaught nature entered the picture with renewed importance in the Hellenistic period. For philosophers who were interested in defining a human life in accordance or agreement with nature as the object of active pursuit but also anxious about the many pathological deviations a given life may take, it was helpful to be able to hold up models where nature’s will unfolds without the taint of culture. The child, accordingly, occupied a privileged place in Hellenistic ethics. Piso, the exponent of Plato’s Academy under Antiochus of Ascalon in Cicero’s *On Ends*, reports that “all the older philosophers . . . turn to the cradle because they think in childhood we are able to recognize the will [*voluntatem*] of nature most easily.” Jacques Brunschwig has memorably called this the “cradle argument.”¹³

It was not only babies, however, who could yield insight into nature’s will. The behavior of nonhuman animals was also enlisted by Hellenistic philosophers in support of arguments about the means by which nature equips animals to flourish: the brute beasts, although slow in other respects, are “clever at living.” In fact, according to a line of argument in ancient thought that extended back at least as far as the fifth century B.C.E., animals are far better at living than we humans are. In a powerful and influential version of the argument, Lucretius contrasts the infant, cast upon the shores of light naked and in need of every kind of vital support, to the other races of animals, for whom the earth and nature provide everything in abundance.¹⁴ The difficulties that humans face in meeting the needs of their natures open up the space for *technē* and sociocultural institutions, conceived of as supplements that repair a basic lack.

¹¹ See Holmes, *Symptom and the Subject* (cit. n. 3), pp. 192–227; and Brooke Holmes, “Causality, Agency, and the Limits of Medicine,” *Apeiron*, 2013, 46:302–326. On the medical analogy in Hellenistic ethics see Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994).

¹² I set aside here the larger question of determinism in Stoic ethics, on which see Susanne Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

¹³ Cicero, *On Ends* 5.55 (note that “*voluntatem*” [“will”] is a widely accepted emendation by Lambinus for the manuscripts’ “*voluptatem*” [“pleasure”]) (here and throughout the essay, translations into English are mine unless otherwise indicated); and Jacques Brunschwig, “The Cradle Argument in Epicureanism and Stoicism,” in *The Norms of Nature: Studies in Hellenistic Ethics*, ed. Malcolm Schofield and Gisela Striker (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 113–144.

¹⁴ Seneca, *Epistle* 121.24; and Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 5.222–227. For further discussion of what I have called “negative exceptionalism” see Brooke Holmes, “The Poetic Logic of Negative Exceptionalism: From a State of Nature to Social Life in Lucretius, Book Five,” in *Lucretius: Poetry, Philosophy, Science*, ed. Daryn Lehoux, A. D. Morrison, and Alison Sharrock (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), pp. 153–191.

Lucretius's anthropology was not, however, the only way of conceptualizing our place with respect to the rest of the animals. The Stoics, by contrast, were adamant that human beings should be elevated over other animals by virtue of their use of reason (*logos*). Nevertheless, they also insisted on a strong homology between animals and children in arguments about the resources with which nature endows animals at birth via *oikeiōsis*. For the newborn was essentially an animal in their view. It is at this stage of life that what I described earlier as a "naturalistic fantasy" unfolds: nature gives animals (and children) all they need to preserve themselves but leaves them to undertake this care on their own behalf. Animals and children pursue a form of care, then, that reconciles the two sides of nature: untaught nature, on the one hand, and nature as a goal to be realized, on the other. I want to take a closer look at the reconciliation enabled by *oikeiōsis*, before raising some questions about its limited applicability to properly human nature.

The word "*oikeiōsis*," a verbal noun in Greek, designated a process by which, as we saw above, the animal is "appropriated" or "entrusted" to itself by nature at the moment of birth. The adjective "*oikeios*," from "*oikos*," "house," was used to denote members of one's household or kin, as well as one's property; it increasingly came to designate what was "proper" to one, as opposed to what was hostile or alien (*allogenos*).¹⁵ It was an idea usually described in terms of an animal's affection for itself. Those terms, however, conceal a more complex structure that encompasses both the animal's awareness of itself and its desire to preserve itself. The *locus classicus* is from Diogenes Laërtius's *Lives of the Philosophers*:

The Stoics say that the animal's first impulse is to watch out for itself, nature from the beginning entrusting it [*oikeiousēs*] to itself as Chrysippus says in the first book of his *On Ends*: what he says is that the first thing that is proper to an animal is its own constitution and the awareness of it. For it would not be likely that nature would estrange the animal from itself or that, having put the animal together, she would neither estrange it nor entrust it to itself. We have to say, accordingly, that nature, having constituted the animal, entrusted it to itself. For in this way it repels what is harmful and approaches what is suitable.¹⁶

One reason this passage is the *locus classicus* on the subject is that we do not actually have Chrysippus's *On Ends* (or any of his seven-hundred-plus works). Our limited primary sources on *oikeiōsis* are mostly at several stages of remove from the early articulation of the doctrine, which makes Diogenes' paraphrase of Chrysippus's views especially important. What it says, in essence, is that an animal's first impulse is toward self-preservation, because nature entrusts it to itself. We are then given a more precise formulation of the "self" inherent in the reflexive construction: the first thing in life that is proper (*oikeion*) to the animal is its constitution and its "awareness" (*suneidēsis*) of it.

This is not the place to untangle the complicated and in some cases contested technical ideas jostling for position in Diogenes' paraphrase. Two points, though, are clear. First, the work of nature, here cast as an agent, is not limited to putting animals together. It extends to orienting animals in a favorable way toward themselves, since in its foresight nature recognizes that animals, unlike other kinds of assemblages—say, beds or shoes—need a way to maintain themselves dynamically. Second, an animal's relationship to itself is closely bound up with the notion of watching out for

¹⁵ See S. G. Pembroke, "*Oikeiōsis*," in *Problems in Stoicism*, ed. A. A. Long (London: Athlone, 1971), pp. 114–149, esp. pp. 115–116.

¹⁶ Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 7.85.

itself. What Diogenes describes, then, is a situation where animals are oriented both inward, toward their own constitution, and outward, toward the things out in the world that can help them and harm them.

The passage from Diogenes begins with a claim about the animal's innate endowments and ends with observations about how animals behave, namely by avoiding harmful things and pursuing beneficial ones. But if one were simply to begin with the observation of animals, it would be possible to reach another conclusion concerning their behavior. One might argue (as the Epicureans did) that the animal is acting for the sake of a more local end, such as pleasure (or the avoidance of pain). The animal could still be understood as the vehicle of its own self-preservation. But its actions would not be motivated by a sense of its own constitution as an object of care and a guide to behavior.

The Stoics strongly resisted this line of argument. Seneca the Younger, for example, gives the example of a child learning to walk despite the discomfort or pain that such efforts can entail, taking this as proof that the child's actions express fidelity to her constitution, rather than a desire for pleasure.¹⁷ It was not enough, then, to say that nature constitutes the animal in such a way that it acts to preserve itself—that is, that the animal's life is sustained only by nature. The Stoics claimed that an animal acts as it does out of a sense that by so doing it is conserving and benefiting something it feels to be its own: itself or, rather, its own constitution. They insisted on what I earlier described as a fold within the animal, through which the animal takes a kind of responsibility for its constitution.

The animal's orientation inward thus occupied a central place in the theory of *oikeiōsis*. But then we might ask how the orientation inward relates to the animal's orientation toward the external world—that is, its pursuit of beneficial things and avoidance of harmful things. On first glance, the inward turn would seem to give rise to the outward one. It is because the animal cares for itself that it responds to certain stimuli in a certain way—eating grass, say, or running from cats.¹⁸ What gets lost in this formulation, however, is the fact that if the animal is going to translate affection for itself into actions aimed at self-preservation, it has to sense, first, that it is the kind of thing that needs preserving. In another classic account of *oikeiōsis* from Cicero's *On Ends*, the Stoic speaker Cato refers to animals' pursuit of beneficial things and avoidance of danger by positing not just their affection for their own constitution but also their fear of destruction. Seneca, in his *Epistle* 121, is even more frank: "No animal enters life free of the fear of death."¹⁹ In short, the love an animal feels for itself is shaped by the perception of vulnerability.

But even endowed with a desire to preserve itself in the face of these dangers, the animal would not get far if it could not perceive specific dangers and sources of benefit in the world. It is precisely the animal's alertness to these specific stimuli that makes the Stoic position so provocative. For the Stoics denied that the animal acquires this sense of what it should pursue and what it should avoid through experience. Rather, at the moment when it emerges from the womb or the egg, the animal knows, as Seneca writes, what is harmful to it and avoids things that might bring death.²⁰ The animal, then, is born ready,

¹⁷ Seneca, *Epistle* 121.7–8.

¹⁸ The Stoics speak of a certain disposition toward the external world (*hexis hormetikē*), organized by perceptions of benefit and harm. For further discussion see Brad Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), p. 190.

¹⁹ Cicero, *On Ends* 3.16; and Seneca, *Epistle* 121.19.

²⁰ Seneca, *Epistle* 121.19.

equipped by nature with a fine-grained sense of how its needs and vulnerabilities intersect with the world beyond its body.

Just how fine grained this sense could be is quite remarkable. The extant accounts of *oikeiōsis* often take us beyond the edge of ethical philosophy proper into the wilder terrain of ancient natural history. Seneca emphasizes that young chickens are scared of cats but not dogs; the hen shows no fear of the peacock or the goose, despite these being larger animals, but intuitively flees the hawk. The second-century C.E. Stoic Hierocles offers a veritable menagerie of comparable cases involving turtles, bulls, asps, bears, toads, and deer. One of his crowning examples is the beaver, who intuits not only that the human who hunts him is hostile but also that what the hunter wants is a drug made from his testicles. If the beaver sees that he has no other means of escape, he castrates himself and leaves the results for the predator, thereby saving himself.²¹

The precision of animal intuitions in Stoicism did not go unchallenged. In *Epistle* 121, Seneca gamely fields challenges from interlocutors who are skeptical about how much the theory of *oikeiōsis* seems to demand of animals at birth. They wonder, with good reason, how a child or an animal could intuitively grasp the Stoic notion of a constitution, as if all living creatures were “born logicians, so that they comprehend a definition which is obscure to the majority of Roman citizens.” They wonder at how an animal knows what to fear in its environment without any experience of harm.²² Seneca’s attempts to hold the party line show signs of strain.²³ Given such difficulties, why were the Stoics so insistent that nature endows animals with such a rich sensitivity to their needs and vulnerabilities?

One significant advantage of the idea of *oikeiōsis* is that it does away with any gap between the animal’s needs and its perception of how to meet them. The animal is programmed for its own survival by a beneficent nature. Yet insofar as it acts in order to secure its own self-preservation, it is no automaton. Herein lies the double orientation of *oikeiōsis* as a gift provided by nature at the animal’s birth. It establishes an open-ended impulse to preserve the self that arises from the animal’s sensing of its own constitution while also establishing conditions under which that impulse is effectively realized, by enabling the animal to perceive sources of benefit and harm in the environment.

If we understand *oikeiōsis* in these terms, it straddles the divide between untaught nature and the practice of taking care of one’s nature. On the one hand, the animal’s behaviors spring effortlessly from intuitions about benefit and harm: the animal pursues exactly what it needs and steers clear of exactly what it should avoid. On the other hand, the animal does not express the dictates of nature in an unmediated way. For the impulse toward self-preservation recasts nature’s prescriptions as expressions of the animal’s fundamental orientation toward itself by providing the animal with the “reason”—under-

²¹ *Ibid.*; and Hierocles, *Elements of Ethics* 3.9–19. See also Aelian, *On the Nature of Animals* 6.34; Pliny, *Natural History* 8.109; Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 1.9; and Martin Devecka, “The Traffic in Glands,” *Journal of Roman Studies*, 2013, 103:88–95. I thank Erika Milam for bringing this article to my attention.

²² Seneca, *Epistle* 121.10. On this ability see also Hierocles, *Elements of Ethics* 3.20–54. The ability of animals to perceive their natural predators was an abiding problem in ancient philosophy. It is in part to account for this ability that Avicenna will introduce a new faculty of the soul into animal psychology, the *vis estimativa*; see Deborah Black, “Estimation in Avicenna: The Logical and Psychological Dimensions,” *Dialogue*, 1993, 32:219–258.

²³ Seneca argues that the child does not grasp the definition of a constitution but merely senses his own: “he doesn’t know what ‘a living creature’ is, but he feels that he is an animal” (*Epistle* 121.10). In response to the second objection, he argues that animals *feel* that they are made of flesh and grasp the vulnerability of flesh to being cut or crushed, going on to develop a fear of animals that exhibit the ability to inflict such harm. This last explanation seems to smuggle in a certain amount of experience (say, the animal’s observation of flesh-damaging animals).

stood loosely—to act on cues about benefit and harm that it receives. The “will” of nature is seamlessly realized through actions that can nevertheless be referred to the animal itself. The theory of *oikeiōsis* thus perfectly coordinated nature and the animal, without the animal collapsing into nature.

I have used the term “animal” throughout here, as the Stoics did, not in opposition to the human but as an umbrella term that includes human beings in the earliest phase of life. Unlike animals, however, humans exit this phase at the point when they acquire reason. The acquisition of reason allows them to retrace the ends given to them by nature as objects of choice (for Diogenes Laërtius, reason is “the craftsman [*technitēs*] of impulse”).²⁴ Through reason, humans eventually reshape the very nature of natural ends, treating the things they used to see as beneficial and harmful as merely things to be preferred or not and gaining insight into the genuine end of human life. That end continues to be understood as “living according to nature,” but the nature in question is human nature in its most singular and perfect expression. The state of affairs described by the theory of *oikeiōsis* is thus, for human beings, transitory, a step en route to a different kind of following nature.

Yet the applicability of *oikeiōsis* to human lives is not as straightforward as one might hope. It is not surprising that our longer texts on *oikeiōsis*, especially Seneca’s letter and the fragment from Hierocles, are replete with observations of animal behavior. The child does make several cameo appearances. But she does not provide many examples of the intuitive understanding of what is needed for survival—and for good reason.²⁵ That a child has a seemingly natural intuition about how to walk or crawl will be plausible to anyone with even a little experience observing babies. But the stronger claim that children come into the world fully equipped with an understanding of benefit and harm is harder to credit. The Stoics’ reliance on animals to illustrate intuitions about survival was a symptom of the difficulty of casting the human infant as perfectly adapted to life without any need for teaching, a difficulty put front and center by Lucretius.

It is also challenging to see how the kind of life prescribed by nature for animals translates into the life according to nature at the highest level of human nature, that of the sage, when the satisfaction of our basic biological needs has been replaced with an end that reflects our nature as rational beings. There has been considerable debate among modern scholars about what it meant for the sage to live according to nature. These interpretive problems are due in part to the fragmentary state of the evidence, in part to changing notions of the ethical ideal among self-avowed Stoics, especially among Roman Stoics, who seem to have increasingly privileged cosmic nature as a guide. Yet even the material to which we do have access suggests that the Stoics did not spell out their ethical ideal. Rather, they saw the life according to nature at the highest stage of human development simply as the outcome of an extraordinarily fine-tuned rational faculty. Such an outcome was, they believed, rarely achieved in reality: as we saw earlier, sages were scarce. Most people lead unnatural, rather than natural, lives. The givenness of the proper goal of human life at the moment of birth was thus counterbalanced in the Stoic view by the elusiveness of the end once humans cross out of childhood into the realm of reason. Stoic naturalism had a strongly idealist streak.

It is perhaps because the life according to nature is so difficult to envision at the highest level of our existence that the description of it in nonhuman animals (and in human beings

²⁴ Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 7.86.

²⁵ See, e.g., the discussion of the child’s fear of the dark in Hierocles, *Elements of Ethics* 7.5–15.

qua animals) played such an important role in Stoic naturalism. The theory of *oikeiōsis* relied on a level of visibility—the behavior of chicks or beavers (I leave aside the question of whether these behaviors were *actually* observed)—that was absent at the other end of human development. From this perspective, the theory’s strength lay in the picture it provided of a perfect fusion between nature and our own impulses to act in the world, what I have been calling the naturalistic fantasy. By means of analogy, the picture becomes available to us as a way of imagining the life according to nature at the highest level, once reason has taken over and, eventually, refashioned our proper end.

This is not the place to reflect on the plausibility of Stoic accounts of animal behavior or Stoic ethics more generally. But what we can see in the theory of *oikeiōsis* is a delicate balancing act between commonly competing aims in variants of naturalism that arise from tensions within the definitions of nature and human nature. The hope is to fall into line with nature, and yet to do so in a way that is neither forced nor mindless. The difficulty lies in doing justice to different aspects of human life: the sense, on the one hand, that humans are like other animals in having particular needs that must be met if they are to stay alive; and the conviction, on the other hand, that the flourishing of humans is richer than mere survival (a conviction that often goes hand in hand with the belief that nonhuman animal life is impoverished by a narrow focus on survival). We can see, too, how much the animal does to sustain the naturalistic fantasy. The animal may not have a rational mind, yet it is “clever at living.” Its knack for life holds out the promise that if we develop our entirely natural capacity for reason, we will reenact the seamless coordination between nature and action that ostensibly characterized our childhood. It is a promise rarely fulfilled. Yet the theory of *oikeiōsis* suggests that the means to its fulfillment are our most intimate possessions.

The beaver who discerns his predator’s motives would seem, in confirming the credulity of the ancients, to provide support for what Daryn Lehoux has called the “Fregiston Pact”—that is, “the agreement that for philosophical purposes science is a two-hundred-year-old activity.”²⁶ Moreover, the assumption that nature supplies our ethical aim puts us a long way from the premises of the moderns’ naturalistic fallacy. If, however, our interest is in the tenacity of that alleged fallacy, ancient ethics offers rich material for reflecting on some of the tensions and challenges of naturalism. In Stoic ethics, nature was neither just the norm at which animals aim nor a program embedded in them at conception. It was, rather, both these things. In nonhuman animals, these two sides of nature were thought to be held in equipoise through the figure of *oikeiōsis*, but in human beings they rarely remained stable. The process whereby reason overwrote nature’s determinism was not smooth. Yet that process was necessary if the nature achieved was to be human. Historical differences aside, the challenge—and the appeal—of defining human nature still persists.

²⁶ Daryn Lehoux, *What Did the Romans Know? An Inquiry into Science and Worldmaking* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 2012), p. 202.