



Self, Action, and Passivity

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Abstract. In a series of works Hubert Dreyfus argues that phenomenological considerations can show the falsity of John McDowell’s claim that our actions are *permeated with rationality*. Dreyfus changes the details of his objections several times in this debate, but I shall argue that there is an implicit false assumption lurking in his thinking throughout his exchanges with McDowell. Originally Dreyfus proposed a distinction between “detached rule-following” and “situation-specific way of coping,” and later he replaces it with the distinction between “subjectivity” and “absorbed coping.” He then uses this framework to interpret some examples, attempting to show that they cannot be accommodated by McDowell’s position. I shall argue that in doing so Dreyfus presupposes too narrow conceptions of “rationality” and “mindedness,” and if these notions are understood appropriately, we can see that phenomenological considerations can be good supplements, rather than objections, to McDowell’s claim that our mindedness is pervasive in actions.

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1. Introduction

Since 1970s, phenomenologist Hubert Dreyfus (1978, 1992, etc.) has undertaken the task of articulating the correct paths to understand the human mind mainly through his critique of artificial intelligence. Recently he opened a new debate specifically over rationality and action with John McDowell. McDowell (1996, 2007a, b) holds that our movements of limbs, qua parts of intentional actions, are conceptual and therefore rational all the way out, but Dreyfus (2001, 2006, 2007a, b) dissents. The present paper is a critical notice on this ongoing debate.

A few words about my strategy: the debate between Dreyfus and McDowell makes up a continuous dialogues: Dreyfus's Pacific APA Presidential Address 2005 was responding to McDowell's earlier works; new exchanges occurred later, and Dreyfus did not reach his stable framework until the final response. Therefore, it would be onerous and ineffective to go through the discussions with the original sequence. I shall instead offer a two-stage presentation of Dreyfus's objections; first its general structure, and then its details. This means that sometimes I will fit Dreyfus's earlier points and examples into his later, stable framework. The motivation is to present Dreyfus at his best.¹

The structure of my discussion is as follows. In section 2 I introduce different notions of "passivity," invoking them to mark the crucial difference between Dreyfus and McDowell. Section 3, which contains my main contention, explains how Dreyfus improves his argumentative framework, and why the improved one is still a nonstarter. Section 4 puts the present theme into a wider context, bringing in the (in)famous Myth of the Given in order to see more clearly what is at stake. Section 5 is a general conclusion, where some morals of this discussion will be drawn.

2. Understanding Passivity

The notion, or notions of "passivity" do not often figure in philosophical discussions explicitly, but they are indeed central to many issues in philosophy. Thanks to the success of modern sciences, many of us regard nature as disenchanted; there are countless events in this disenchanted nature, and they are in a significant sense *passive*: given certain natural laws and certain initial conditions, certain events follow.

¹ McDowell's responses to Dreyfus have been reprinted in one of his two new paper collections. I shall nevertheless refer to his original publications in *Inquiry*, since they appeared with Dreyfus's two pieces, and it is easier for readers to refer to if I stick to the original versions.

There is no “elbow room,” to use a metaphor made popular in relevant issues by Daniel Dennett (1984). There is still a long way for sciences to go, to be sure, but many of us agree on this scientific outlook generally.

Puzzles arise when we consider our capacities as human *subjects*. We perceive, think, and act. None of these, however, seems to sit well with the scientific outlook. We are subjects, and what makes us subjects is something *active*: we are not like stones and lower animals in the sense that we can actively perceive, think, and act.² It is difficult to see how the active aspects, no matter how we understand them, can fit into the scientific outlook in general. For those who do not want to give up the very idea of “subjectivity,” nevertheless, it is necessary to reconcile the active and the passive elements. On the face of it, activity (or probably better, spontaneity in a broad sense) and passivity are outright incompatible with each other, so to reconcile them it seems we must rethink both. In this paper I embark on this task by considering a series of recent exchanges between Dreyfus and McDowell, as briefly introduced in the first section.

Let me introduce some backgrounds of the debate first. Over some decades McDowell has developed a highly systematic account of intentionality and justification, and the account involves miscellaneous elements of our philosophy traditions. For my purposes, I shall simplify his central claim as follows: conceptual capacities are inextricably involved in our perceptual experiences. This is grounded by arguing that it is Kantian spontaneity, i.e. conceptual capacities, that are responsible for both intentionality and justification. This is not an uncontroversial point: in both intentionality and justification, many philosophers think that there are certain non-conceptual elements in play. On the one hand, because it seems (at least for some) that there needs to be a relatively unshakable foundation of empirical knowledge, the foundation itself, perceptual experience, must be non-conceptual, for to be conceptual is to be *contaminated* by human thoughts.³ On the other hand, because perceptual experience is about the world, it seems that the world must in some sense provide materials for perception. So, the thought goes, there must be something extra-conceptual to be divided up by our conceptual grids. These are just two examples of the various motivations of the views objected by McDowell.⁴

² Things become very complicated and fuzzy when it comes to lower animals. For one thing, this notion covers too many species; for another, many people think that lower animals can actively perceive and act (maybe not think). I will say something about this in passing.

³ Another motivation is the fact that we seem to share basic perceptual capacities with animals and human infants. This is part of Dreyfus’s case against McDowell.

⁴ I do not back up these sketchy descriptions with McDowell’s huge previous works for I do not want to distract the readers. In debating with Dreyfus, McDowell offers his own summary for relevant aspects of his philosophy, which will be quoted later. Another thing to be noted is that though Dreyfus and McDowell debate about

One would probably expect that this “conceptualism” could be naturally extended to the case of action. Action also mediates mind and world, though with opposite directions. To phrase this in John Searle’s term (1983), they have different “directions of fit.” And this expectation is encouraged by McDowell’s own remarks in Lecture V of *Mind and World* (1996).⁵ He sketches his view on action by saying that “intentions without overt activity are idle, and movements of limbs without concepts are mere happenings, not expressions of agency” (McDowell 1996, p. 89). It should be clear that McDowell attempts to offer a parallel account for action, though he does not finish the project in the lectures. Perception reflects the world, action changes the world; perception sustains beliefs, action carries out intentions. To conceive a parallel story is not so unreasonable, at least at an intuitive level. Therefore, some philosophers start to envisage what McDowell would say, or should say, about action, Jonathan Dancy (2006) for example. Some other philosophers go even further to criticize the envisaged McDowellian account of action; Hubert Dreyfus is one among them. Even before entering the details of the debate between them, one may already feel something really intriguing about the discussions: traditions confront to other traditions; German idealism versus existential phenomenology, to paint with broad strokes. McDowell invokes a range of philosophical traditions to back up his position: Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein, and Gadamer, among others. A striking feature of this group is that phenomenologists are absent: Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty are not in the list. Dreyfus suggests that McDowell’s position is defective exactly in this respect.⁶

I suggest that the notion of “passivity” is the crux of their disagreements. To anticipate, Dreyfus thinks that our bodies’ capacities to cope with the world are *purely passive*, but McDowell denies this. For McDowell, our bodies are rational animals’ bodies, and this implies that even our embodied copings with the world are rational *all the way down*, that is, *not purely passive*. These two philosophers’ radically different conceptions of “passivity” affect their overall pictures significantly.

conceptuality, I do not think it is the best term for the discussion. The main reason is that it would involve how McDowell and Dreyfus understand the notion of “concept,” how cognitive scientists understand it, and which conception is right. This is far beyond the scope of the present paper. In what follows I use “concept” and related notions in a loose way. I think the notion of “mindedness” is relatively neutral, but as a matter of course, every notion is theory-laden.

⁵ In conversation, Alva Noë expresses his negative attitude towards this expectation. He thinks that after all, experience and action are quite different episodes. I recognize the fact that this expectation is not universal, but that will not affect my following discussions.

⁶ Husserl is an exception. Dreyfus is also hostile to Husserl’s thoughts, so he regards his objections to McDowell as both Heideggerian and Merleau-Pontean.

A few words about passivity, conceptuality, and rationality:⁷ McDowell's basic insistence is that conceptuality and rationality can be made compatible with passivity. At the beginning of the paper, I characterized passivity in terms of natural events, laws, and initial conditions, and this is relatively uncontroversial. What's at issue is whether passivity entails non-conceptuality or non-rationality. In perception, passivity seems to motivate several versions of non-conceptualism; now in action, Dreyfus's position is parallel to those in perception. But Dreyfus's objections are still unique in the sense that they are rooted in the phenomenological tradition, and in what follows I am going to focus on Dreyfus's phenomenological objections in particular.

3. Mindedness and Embodied Coping

Let me begin by a quotation of McDowell's summary of his own thoughts relevant to the present discussion:

I have urged that our perceptual relation to the world is conceptual all the way out to the world's impacts on our receptive capacities. The idea of the conceptual that I mean to be invoking is to be understood in close connection with the idea of rationality, in the sense that is in play in the traditional separation of mature human beings, as rational animals, from the rest of the animal kingdom. Conceptual capacities are capacities that belong to their subject's rationality. So another way of putting my claim is to say that our perceptual experience is permeated with rationality. I have also suggested, in passing, that something parallel should be said about our agency. (McDowell 2007a, p. 338-339)

We will see that McDowell and Dreyfus have very different notions of the main concepts appeared in this passage, such as "perception," "concept," "receptive capacities," "rationality," "animals," and "agency." These discrepancies prevent effective communication between them.⁸

The story begins like this. Dreyfus briefly took issue with McDowell in his introduction to Samuel Todes's *Body and World*. He writes:

Neither Davidson nor McDowell tries to describe *perceptual objects as they are in themselves* and how they become the objects of thought. By calling

⁷ This is a response to the reviewer's comments.

⁸ McDowell himself, in his replies to Dreyfus, has attempted to clarify his relevant notions, and Dreyfus concedes that he misunderstood McDowell at some points. But his concessions are *piecemeal*, and there are still some significant misunderstandings lurking in Dreyfus's final response. What I will do here is to correct the misunderstandings in a *systematic* way, and through this I hope the lurking misunderstandings will thereby be dislodged.

attention to the structure of nonconceptual, practical perception and showing how its judgments can be transformed into the judgments of detached thought, Todes is able to provide a framework in which to explain how the content of perception, while not itself conceptual, can provide the basis for *conception*. Thus, Todes's *Body and World* can be read as a significant anticipatory response to McDowell's *Mind and World*. (Dreyfus 2001, p. xvi, my italics)

Here Dreyfus separates perception from conception. He thinks that there is something called "perception as they are in themselves," as quoted above. This seems to beg the question against McDowell, but I think Dreyfus is unblamable at this point, for what he did there is to introduce Todes's seminal work, situating it into certain philosophical contexts by contrasting it with McDowell's thoughts. Although it will be better if he provides substantive arguments for the claim, I think we can be more charitable here.⁹ What I mainly concern is a series of debates where Dreyfus and McDowell engage with each other seriously.

Dreyfus begins his real arguments against McDowell in his 2005 APA Presidential Address. He starts his argumentation by posing this question: "[c]an we accept McDowell's Sellarsian claim that perception is conceptual 'all the way out,' thereby denying the more basic perceptual capacities we seem to share with prelinguistic infants and higher animal" (Dreyfus 2006, p. 43)? The positive statement of his position goes like this: "in assuming that all intelligibility, even perception and skillful coping, *must be, at least implicitly, conceptual*...Sellars and McDowell join Kant in endorsing what we might call *the Myth of the Mental*" (Dreyfus 2006, p. 46; italics altered by me). In supporting this claim, he brings in a distinction that is crucial to his argumentations:

The actual phenomenon [i.e. expertise] suggests that to become experts we must switch from *detached rule-following* to a more *involved and situation specific way of coping*...Such emotional involvement seems to be necessary to facilitate the switchover from *detached, analytical rule following* to an entirely different *engaged, holistic mode of experience*... (Dreyfus 2006, pp. 7-8, my italics)

Dreyfus uses some other distinctions to supplement this one, including detached theoretical perspective/engaged situation in the world, calculate/involve, and knowing-that/knowing-how (Dreyfus 2006, p. 44, p. 47, and p. 48, respectively). I shall focus on the one appeared in the quotation. Dreyfus assumes that McDowell

⁹ For a detailed discussion concerning the relations between Todes, Dreyfus, and McDowell, see Joseph Rouse (2005).

regards actions as detached rule-following, but he never tells us why he thinks that. Moreover, we have positive reasons to think otherwise. In his critique of Saul Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein (Kripke 1982), McDowell painstakingly disabuses this detached conception of rule-following. For example, he writes:

[Kripke's] line of interpretation gets off on the wrong foot, when it credits Wittgenstein with acceptance of a "skeptical paradox" ... the reasoning that would lead to this "skeptical paradox" starts with something Wittgenstein aims to show up as a mistake: the assumption, in this case, that the understanding on which I act when I obey an order *must be an interpretation*. (McDowell 1984/1998, p. 236)

Kripke conceives understanding as a species of interpretation, so whenever I use the "plus" function, I can interpret my past usages of it so as to conform other deviant functions, hence the paradox. McDowell urges that the source of the paradox is the *detached* conception of rule-following: we *need to do interpretation* when our understanding is functioning. The problematic picture is that there are some freestanding mental items that have no normative relations with the external world, so we need interpretations to build up these relations. It is this detached picture, McDowell submits, that generates the skeptical paradox. He further connects his critique to Wittgenstein's notions of "practice," "custom," and "form of life." It is not clear, at least for me, why Dreyfus does not regard McDowell as an ally at least in this respect.¹⁰

The dichotomy between detached rule-following and involved skillful coping seems to be dubious, and it is precisely what McDowell disagrees with when he writes that "[w]e find ourselves *always already engaging* with the world" (McDowell 1996, p. 34).¹¹ What concerns Dreyfus is actually congenial to McDowell. Dreyfus admits this misunderstanding in his reply, "The Return of the Myth of the Mental" (2007a, p. 353): "I did assume, accepting the traditional understanding, that McDowell understood rationality and *conceptuality* as *general*. I should have known better. I'm sorry that I attributed to McDowell the view of rationality he explicitly rejects in his papers on Aristotle."¹² Unfortunately, Dreyfus lapses again ten pages

¹⁰ For McDowell's characterization and criticisms to the "sign-post" conception of mental items and its relation to interpretation, see his 1993/1998, especially p. 264-5.

¹¹ The reviewer reminds that this remark of McDowell appears in the context of contrasting the so-called "sideways-on view" and McDowell's own view, as opposed to the context concerning detachment and engagement. However, I believe what McDowell says there can be applied naturally to his discussions with Dreyfus, since the sideways-on view can be seen as another version of the *detachment* view.

¹² Dreyfus mentions Aristotle because he and McDowell conduct the discussion by focusing on Aristotle's notion of "Phronesis." Since they have reached agreement at this point, I shall not talk more about it here. I relate the discussion to Kripke and Wittgenstein instead, for the connection is relevant but missed in their exchanges.

later, when he contrasts “detached conceptual intentionality” with “involved motor intentionality” (Dreyfus 2007a, p. 363). I am puzzled by this: Dreyfus first claims, rightly, that he and McDowell agree that conceptuality is situation-dependent; that is, not general or detached. But after that he, in the very same paper, describes conceptual intentionality as detached. Therefore, I don’t see decisive progress in Dreyfus’s first reply. I am not saying that there is no progress there, to be sure, but Dreyfus still preserves the general structure from his Presidential Address. It can be dubbed the “detachment/involvement” distinction.¹³

Dreyfus replaces this structure with a new one in his second reply. Now the crucial distinction is constituted by “subjectivity” and “absorption”:

[There is] a deep issue dividing us – an issue that is obscured by my failure to distinguish explicitly *absorption* and involvement.

I should have argued that *subjectivity* (not detachment) is the lingering ghost of the mental... (Dreyfus 2007b, p. 373, my italics)

In this final response, Dreyfus realizes that it is inappropriate to saddle McDowell with the notion of “detachment,” and he proposes that it is “subjectivity,” which he means the operation of “subject” or “agent,” that is at fault. Besides, realizing that McDowell can accommodate the phenomena of “involvement,” Dreyfus submits that it is “absorption,” that is, “involved coping *at its best*” (Dreyfus 2007b, p. 373, my italics), that shows the falsity of conceptualism. This completes my characterization of Dreyfus’s stable framework. Now I turn to the details of his objections.¹⁴

The final version of the general framework is the “subjectivity/absorption” distinction. By “subjectivity” Dreyfus means “agency,” which is “the lingering ghost of the mental” (Dreyfus 2007b, p. 373) according to him. As to “absorption,” he writes that “[i]n fully absorbed coping, there is no immersed *ego*, not even an implicit one” (Dreyfus 2007b, p. 374, my italics). And he further adds that “in *attentive, deliberate*...action an ego is always involved” (Dreyfus 2007b, p. 374, my italics). Notice that before Dreyfus reaches this final version, the notion of “attention”

¹³ As the reviewer reminds, we might read Dreyfus as connecting detached conceptual intentionality to Gadamer’s “free, distanced orientation.” However, I think this is over-charitable, for Dreyfus always insists on the distinction between rationality and skillful coping, and detachment/involvement is used to label that distinction. If so, then he still does not recognize the possibility of *non-detached* rationality.

¹⁴ Since I promised to present Dreyfus’s best position, readers might wonder why I still criticize his early view in these paragraphs. By that promise, I mean I will not go through the details in Dreyfus’s early view, since it is not as good as the later one, and readers can check Dreyfus’s own old paper by themselves. But I still think that some preliminary replies on McDowell’s behalf should be made before moving to Dreyfus’s later position, for there are some important similarities between the early and the later views. I beg my readers’ patience here.

and the like has occupied a central place in his objections, including his favorite example, Chuck Knoblauch:

As second baseman for the New York Yankees, Knoblauch was so successful he was voted best infielder of the year, but one day, rather than simply fielding a hit and throwing the ball to first base, it seems he *stepped back* and took up a “free, distanced orientation” towards the ball and how he was throwing it – to the mechanics of it, as he put it. After that, he couldn’t recover his former absorption...Interestingly, even after he seemed unable to resist stepping back and being mindful, Knoblauch could still play brilliant baseball in difficult situations – catching a hard-hit ground ball and throwing it to first faster than thought. What he couldn’t do was field an easy routine grounder directly to second base, because that gave him time to think before throwing to first. (Dreyfus 2007a, p. 354)

The notion of “attention” and the like play a heavy role in Dreyfus’s objections through out the whole debate. Here is another example¹⁵:

[We] are only part-time rational animals. We can, when necessary, step back and put ourselves into a free-distanced relation to the world. We can also monitor our activity while performing it...But *monitoring* what we are doing as we are doing it...leads to performance which is at best competent. (Dreyfus 2007a, pp. 354-355, my italics).

This line of argumentation, nevertheless, is both uncharitable as an interpretation and ungrounded as a thesis. Consider the passage McDowell first invokes the notion of “stepping back”:

Consider someone following a marked trail, who at a crossing of paths goes to the right in response to a signpost pointing that way. It would be absurd to say that for going to the right to be a rational response to the signpost, it must issue from the subject’s making an explicit determination that the way the signpost points gives her a reason for going to the right. What matters is just that she acts as she does because (this is a reason-introducing “because”) the signpost points to the right...What shows that she goes to the right in rational response to the way the signpost points might be just that she can *afterwards* answer the question why she went to the right - a request for her reason for doing that - by saying “There was a signpost pointing to the right.” She need not have adverted to that reason and decided on that basis to go to the right. (McDowell 2005, pp. 1066-1067)¹⁶

¹⁵ There are more in p. 355, 363, 373.

¹⁶ Dreyfus does not refer to this particular essay, but he focused on it when he prepared his earlier version responding to McDowell. The earlier version, “Detachment, Involvement, and Rationality: Are We Essentially Rational Animals?” was presented at Harvard, but I cannot quote it since it is unpublished.

First of all, notice that the subject in this scenario steps back and reflects on her *reason* for the action *retrospectively*, as opposed to Dreyfus's subject who steps back and reflects on his *mechanics* of the action when he is *carrying out the action*. So the fact that the stepping-back screws up the expertise is not obviously relevant. Secondly, it is clear that "mindedness" never means "attention" in McDowell's writings¹⁷: it would be insane to hold that our perceptual experiences (and actions) are *attentive* all the way out; if that were the claim, then *Mind and World* would be easily refuted. Dreyfus's reading of McDowell strikes me as uncharitable.

Dreyfus reminds us that absorbed coping is involved coping at its best. He should have acknowledged that, by similar considerations, attention, deliberation, and monitoring are mindedness at its best. This means that mindedness is not exhausted by attention and the like. To claim otherwise, Dreyfus needs to establish that attention is the mark of the mental. I see every reason to oppose this claim.¹⁸

McDowell never claims that there is an immersed or implicit self in actions, given the close connection between the self and attention insisted by Dreyfus. The self does accompany intentional actions in a weaker sense that actions are within the realm of the conceptual or the rational. But Dreyfus disagrees. He urges that cases like the chess Grandmaster show that absorbed coping is in no sense rational (Dreyfus 2007b, p. 374). I suggest we compare that case with the case like alien hand or reflexive behaviors. Dreyfus is not willing to identify absorbed coping with mere reflexive behaviors, so presumably it still has to do with our agency.¹⁹ Dreyfus is hostile to this idea, for he persistently confines mindedness to the realm of the attentive. But as I just said, McDowell never claims that, and the claim itself is simply wrong: when you are not paying attention to one of your beliefs, that does not disqualify that belief's status as a *mental* state. To concentrate on the notion of "attention" as Dreyfus understands it (i.e., monitoring) is a red herring.

In identifying mindedness with the attentive, Dreyfus cannot make sense of McDowell's proposal:

¹⁷ And McDowell never uses the notion of "mindful." Although "mindful" and "minded" are almost interchangeable according to many dictionaries, "minded" is supposed to capture the *passivity* of the mind. This thought is not available for Dreyfus because he always identifies mind with attention or reflection.

¹⁸ It would be more plausible to hold that attention is the mark of the conscious, but even this qualified claim is not entirely uncontroversial. Also, when philosophers make this qualified claim, what they mean by "attention" is much broader, e.g., they include low-level information processing, while Dreyfus uses "attention" to mean something like vigilance, which is much higher-level.

¹⁹ The reviewer reminds that this point might come close to begging the question against Dreyfus. I agree, but I believe that I do not really beg it. I do assume that Dreyfus also wants a distinction between expertise and reflexive behaviors, such as knee jerk reflex, but it is difficult to imagine that any phenomenologist would deny this difference.

This pervasiveness claim, however, seems to be based on a *category mistake*. Capacities are *exercised* on occasion, but that does not allow one to conclude that, even when they are not exercised, they are, nonetheless, “*operative*” and thus pervade all our activities. (Dreyfus 2007b, p. 372, my italics)

We are not allowed to make that conclusion, according to Dreyfus, for to claim that conceptuality is operative when not being exercised involves a category mistake. But that is not so. To say that conceptuality or mindedness is operative but not exercised is to insist that conceptual capacities can be activated *passively*. This may sound strange for Dreyfus or some others, but they need to tell us why that is incoherent or at least problematic.

Some might think that what Dreyfus has in mind is the weaker claim that McDowell’s pervasiveness claim is a *non sequitur*, that is, does not follow from the fact that we can often attribute reasons for our past behaviors in retrospect (“supposed to follow,” Dreyfus 2007b, p. 372). If this is so, then he is surely right about logic. But McDowell nowhere commits this inference. It is not surprising that when Dreyfus makes this point, he does not have explicit citation: it is just not possible to find a passage that commits such a serious logical fallacy.

Dreyfus acknowledges that “mindedness” is a technical term on McDowell’s part (Dreyfus 2007b, p. 374), but he does not really respect this point: he opens his response to McDowell by classifying “conceptuality” and “mindedness” as *mentalist* notions (Dreyfus 2007b, p. 371). “Mentalism” is a very vague term, to be sure, but to my knowledge none of its meanings fits McDowell’s usage. If McDowell uses “conceptuality” mentalistically, how can he manage to answer the charge that his position is idealistic in Berkeley’s sense?

Dreyfus would presumably press this question: “if mindedness is not identical to a monitoring self, then what is it?” To this McDowell has an answer:

It is a matter of an “I do”...Conceiving action in terms of the “I do” is a way of registering *the essential first-person character* of the realization of practical rational capacities that acting is. (McDowell 2007b, p. 367, my italics)

Dreyfus objects to this, but again on the false assumption that this first-person character is in the realm of the attentive (Dreyfus 2007b, p. 375). What McDowell does mean, however, is that our absorbed coping, involved coping at its best, is not like cases such as alien hands. By contrast, in repudiating this first-person character, it is not clear how Dreyfus can leave room for the crucial distinction between absorbed coping and mere reflexive behaviors. Maybe he would appeal to the notion

of “motivation,” but if this move were made, it would become not clear how Dreyfus’s view is different from McDowell’s one.

Dreyfus sets a dilemma between “a meaninglessly bodily movement” and “an action done by a subject for a reason” to McDowell (Dreyfus 2007b, p. 374). McDowell would escape this dilemma by insisting that (intentional) bodily movements are *meaningful*. Dreyfus would agree on this point, but it should be clear that this “motor intentionality” can be appropriately understood only by those who respect the distinction between absorbed coping and mere reflexive behaviors.

About this ownership consideration, Dreyfus says:

Of course, the coping going on *is* mine in the sense that the coping can be interrupted at any moment by a transformation that results in an experience of stepping back from the flow of current coping. I then retrospectively attach an “I think” to the coping and take responsibility for my actions.²⁰ (Dreyfus 2007a, p. 356).

McDowell’s explanation of this is the pervasiveness claim, but Dreyfus’s is not convinced. His alternative explanation is, surprisingly enough, purely physiological (Dreyfus 2007b, p.374). But this is problematic. For one thing, this physiological claim is compatible with all camps in this debate; for another, if it is the whole story for Dreyfus, then how can the notion of “responsibility” mentioned in the quotation above be explained?

Later Dreyfus seems to radicalize his answer. In describing McDowell’s view he disagrees with, he writes that “to the question ‘who acts?’ [McDowell] responds: ‘the answer is “I do”’” (Dreyfus 2007b, p. 373). But if this is an answer Dreyfus objects to, he seems to have no alternative but commit that the answer is “this body does.” That is why McDowell argues that “[t]he real myth in this neighborhood is...the Myth of the Disembodied Intellect” (McDowell 2007a, p. 349). Dreyfus replies that this Myth is more like Gadamer’s and McDowell’s view, for “[i]t assumes that human beings are defined by their capacity to distance themselves from their involved coping” (Dreyfus 2007a, p. 355). This is not true, for what McDowell is saying is that involved copings are *rational* though *unreflective*; the notion of “distance” is not applicable here. And even if one holds this definition of human beings, it does not follow immediately that our mindedness is disembodied. Dreyfus rejects this because he mistakenly identifies mindedness with attention or deliberation. By contrast, McDowell can legitimately attribute that Myth to Dreyfus because “[i]f you

²⁰ Here Dreyfus recognizes that the stepping back at issue is retrospective, but he lapsed earlier in discussing Knoblauch’s case.

distinguish me from my body, and give my body that person-like character, you have too many person-like things in the picture..." (McDowell 2007b, p. 369) That is to say, if both the self and "this body" are person-like things and the self is not this body, then it must be a disembodied person. Dreyfus does not address this objection at all.

Dreyfus thinks our animal nature has no philosophically interesting differences from other animals. This is backed up by what McDowell identifies as the "quick argument": from the premise that we share basic perceptual capacities and embodied coping skills to the conclusion that "those capacities and skills, as we have them, cannot be permeated with rationality, since other animals are not rational" (McDowell 2007a, p. 343). 'But the quick argument does not work.' McDowell continues,

The claim that the capacities and skills are shared comes to no more than this: there are descriptions of things we can do that apply also to things other animals can do...But the truth about a human being's exercise of competence in making her around, in a performance that can be described like that, need not be *exhausted* by the match with what can be said about, say, a cat's correspondingly describable response to a corresponding affordance. The human being's response is, if you like, indistinguishable from the cat's response *qua* response to an affordance describable in those terms. But it does not follow that the human being's response cannot be unlike the cat's response in being the human being's rationality at work. (McDowell 2007a, p. 343)

This reflects a central thought of McDowell's thinking: when two phenomena share something, we are not forced to regard this "something" as a *discrete* thing, "a core" shared by these two phenomena. "It is not compulsory," as he likes to put it. And he further argues that "if we do take this line, there is no satisfactory way to understand the role of the supposed core in our perceptual lives" (McDowell 1996, p. 64). Here "perceptual lives" is of course just an example. This central thought is two-staged: first, the factorizing way is not compulsory, and second, it will lead to in principle irresolvable quandary. In the case of passivity, the devastating problem is the infamous Myth of the Given.

4. The Real Myth of the Given

"The Myth of the Given" was introduced and criticized by Wilfrid Sellars (1956/1997) in his celebrated "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind." Many contemporary philosophers identify the myth with indubitability, but that's not Sellars's original

formulation.²¹ Now Dreyfus's target is McDowell, not Sellars, so let's turn to McDowell's formulation of the dialectics. He first introduces the idea of the *sui generis* character of the space of reasons, compared with the realm of law. The former is in the "normative contexts," whereas the latter is exhausted by the "empirical descriptions":

Sellars separates concepts that are intelligible only in terms of how they serve to place things in the logical space of reasons, such as the concept of knowledge, from concepts that can be employed in "empirical description" ...whatever the relations are that constitute the logical space of nature [i.e., the realm of law], they are *different in kind* from the normative relations that constitutes the logical space of reasons. (McDowell 1996, pp. xiv-xv)

And if we place something in the realm of law, but demand it to do something only an inhabitant of the space of reasons can do, then we commit something like the "naturalistic fallacy":

The idea of a tribunal belongs...in what Sellars calls "the logical space of reason"...But the idea of experience, at least construed in terms of impressions, evidently belongs in a logical space of natural connections. That can easily make it seem that if we try to conceive experience as a tribunal, we must be falling into the naturalistic fallacy... (McDowell 1996, p. xvi)

This is how McDowell identifies the Myth of the Given. Now Dreyfus thinks his picture by no means falls into this Myth:

Given its structural similarity to empiricism, we need to make clear that existential phenomenology does not assume an *indubitable* Given on which to base empirical certainties. As with all forms of intentionality, solicitations can be *misleading* and in responding to such solicitations one can be misled. (Dreyfus 2007a, p. 362, my italics)

Notice that Dreyfus distances himself from the Myth of the Given by stressing that the foundations in his picture are not indubitable, but this does not respond to the mystical part of the Given identified by McDowell. Notice that when McDowell diagnoses the oscillating seesaw in modern philosophy, he never mentions "foundationalism." Foundationalism, at least in its stronger form, often implies indubitability, but that is not the problem McDowell is identifying. The

²¹ Willem deVries and Timm Triplett make an admirable effort to gloss this formidable piece. In page xxii and xxiii, they point out that Sellars did not identify the myth with incorrigibility (indubitability). See Willem deVries and Timm Triplett (2000)

McDowellian problematic is constituted by coherentism and *the Myth of the Given*, not foundationalism.

The worse thing is that later Dreyfus says something exactly fall prey to the Myth of the Given:

The world of solicitations, then, is not foundational in the sense that it is indubitable and grounds our empirical claims, but it is the self-sufficient, constant, and pervasive background that provides the base for our dependent, intermittent, activity of stepping back, subjecting our activity to rational scrutiny, and spelling out the objective world's rational structure. (Dreyfus 2007a, p. 363)

It is not clear that what the "base-providing" claim amounts to, but obviously Dreyfus thinks solicitations have to do with our rational structures. Now how does he characterize solicitations as such? In the figure that he invokes to contrast McDowell's notion of "world" with Merleau-Ponty's, he writes that for phenomenologists the world is "[s]olicitations to act; [a] web of attractions and repulsions" (Dreyfus 2007a, p. 357). Later in contrasting with "affordance," he binds solicitations with the notion of "drawing" (Dreyfus 2007a, p. 361). Now solicitations sound like something in the realm of law: in this realm there is no freedom; we are just drawn into these or those movements of limbs, or "expertise" in Dreyfus sense. Freedom kicks in when we step back and reflect, so it does not belong to solicitations, in Dreyfus's sense. Dreyfus says that solicitations "can be misled" (Dreyfus 2007a, p. 362), and this makes Merleau-Pontean world "normative" (Dreyfus 2007a, p. 357). But solicitations in this sense are just attractions and repulsions constituted by relations between objects and our bodies, which subject to the realm of law, so "being misled" can be only a metaphor. It is not that he explicitly holds this view, but what he have said about solicitation and affordance, as quoted in this paragraph, commit him the view I attribute to him. By contrast, McDowell's world deserves to be called "normative," for he argues that the world is encompassed by the realm of the conceptual, and conceptual relations are normative connectedness if anything is.²²

In this way, Dreyfus unwittingly commits a version of the Myth of the Given: solicitations are inhabitants in the realm of law, but they are supposed to "provide the base" for the space of reasons: "[t]hese solicitations have a systematic order that...works in the background to *make rationality possible*" (Dreyfus 2007a, p. 358,

²² The reviewer kindly reminds that my remarks here involve substantial philosophical claims, and it is necessary to engage Merleau-Ponty deeper in order to have a more complete discussion. I think, however, that unavoidably requires a separate, substantial piece. That's why here I do not claim to have objections to Merleau-Ponty. This is humility for my part, and I think this is also true of McDowell's replies to Dreyfus.

my italics). Given that Dreyfus is not a bald naturalist, who is willing to bite the bullet of reducing the space of reasons to the realm of law, his picture is ultimately fall prey to the Myth of the Given.

I find Dreyfus's notion of the body peculiar. On the one hand, he attributes the body person-like characters; on the other, the body responds to only solicitations conceived as inhabitants in the realm of law. I see no way to reconcile these two elements in his picture.

Dreyfus recognizes a problem similar to the one we are discussing: “[the existential phenomenologist] owes an account of how our absorbed, situated experience comes to be *transformed* so that we experience context-free, self-sufficient substances with detachable properties...” (Dreyfus 2007a, p. 364, my italics) But the problem is much more serious than this. Given that Dreyfus presumably accepts the *sui generis* character of the space of reasons, and given that his understanding of solicitations commits him to put them in the realm of law, the “owing an account” acknowledgement does not touch the real and deep problem. He goes on to accuse that “the conceptualists can't give an account of how we are absorbed in the world...” (Dreyfus 2007a, p. 364) But this is not so. Given that McDowell never identifies conceptuality and mindedness with a monitoring self, cases like Knoblauch are simply irrelevant. Dreyfus prefers the phenomenological approach because it “accepts the challenge of relating the preconceptual world to the conceptual world...” (Dreyfus 2007a, p. 364), but what we should say is that the phenomenologist accepts the challenge *before really appreciating it*. On the contrary, while the conceptualist also accepts the *sui generis* character of the space of reasons, he puts solicitations in the realm of the conceptual, and this avoids the Myth of the Given and intellectualism at the same time (since conceptuality is not in the realm of law, *and* is not identical to a monitoring self either).

5. Setting Straight the Debate

As a dedicated phenomenologist, Dreyfus insists that “without any *phenomenological* description of just what it is like for our absorbed coping to be pervaded by conceptuality, it is not clear what meaning we should give to this term” (Dreyfus 2007b, p. 372, my italics). I disagree with him at two points. First, the term “conceptuality” is not a phenomenal concept (if any), so it is confused to demand us to give it phenomenological descriptions. Second, phenomenological descriptions are not crucial in this kind of context. Most of us agree that we think with concepts,

but frankly speaking I do not *feel* that I am using concepts when I think. Or better, I have no idea *what it is like* to use concepts. To say that we do or do not use concepts on some occasions depend on non-phenomenological reasons.²³

If what I have said so far is correct in general outlines, I side with McDowell (2007a, p. 349) that many of Heidegger's, Merleau-Ponty's, and Dreyfus's thoughts should be regard as supplementations, as opposed to corrections, to the conceptualist picture. That is, although the cases of Knoblauch and the chess Grandmaster are compatible with McDowell's view, more can be, and should be said about these or other interesting cases. I hope the conversations between these two important thinkers can go on and on in better ways after my efforts to set straight the debate.

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The present paper evolves from 'Towards a Conceptualist Account of Action: Answering Phenomenological Challenge,' which was written when I visited U.C. Berkeley, fall 2006. During the visiting I attended Hubert Dreyfus's and Hannah Ginsborg's seminar, 'McDowell and Merleau-Ponty'; I am indebted to both of them very much. I also gained various helpful comments from Alva Noë, who also attended the seminar. Dreyfus, my main opponent in this paper, cast doubt on the notion of 'we' in McDowell's remarks that '[w]e find ourselves always already engaging with the world' (McDowell 1996: 34): 'who is the "we" for McDowell? A subject? A Kantian "I think"?' This query reminded me about the relation between action and self. At that time I could not come up with a satisfying response to Dreyfus; the present paper is supposed to be a further and fuller answer to his challenge. Last but not least, I benefit from a long and critical comment from a

²³ The reviewer points out to me that a lot of points here turn on how we understand phenomenal concepts and the task of phenomenology. The former requires deeper engagement with philosophers like Galen Strawson, and the latter, phenomenologists from Husserl to contemporaries, including Dreyfus. I appreciate this reminder very much, and actually that is part of my reasons to write this essay: I think the debate between McDowell and Dreyfus will become a paradigm of the conversation between the so-called two big traditions in the western philosophy, and no doubt this kind of exchange presupposes profound backgrounds on both sides. Therefore, to get clear about what are at stake is extremely important at the initial stage of the discussion. This is how I conceive my contribution here. And undoubtedly much more efforts in connecting resources on both sides are required.

reader, whose identity will not be revealed here. The comment is so negative that I cannot but force myself to rethink many points in this paper. Although it turns out that I do not agree with most of the charges, and therefore revisions are kept minimal, I still want to express my gratitude here. For some technical reasons, the paper has not come out until recently, and McDowell has updated his view on conceptuality in his exchanges with Charles Travis. I do not make any substantial revision in response to it, since I believe what is at stake between McDowell and Dreyfus is independent of McDowell's updates. Also, after all these years I myself have changed my mind to some extent concerning conceptuality in general, but again it does not affect my evaluation of the McDowell-Dreyfus debate here. Therefore I leave the paper largely as it was.

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