Hubert Dreyfus on Practical and Embodied Intelligence[*]

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I. Introduction

If anyone deserves to be called the gadfly of 20th century analytic philosophy, it is Hubert Dreyfus. Like Socrates, he brought one burning, deceptively simple insight to bear in every public conversation into which he entered. Like Socrates, with great zeal he went repeatedly against the mainstream in a way that could provoke and exasperate his interlocutors, never more so than when he put his finger on a fundamental shortcoming of a cherished theory or project. Like Socrates, he had a well-deserved reputation for being a bit of a dragon slayer: his career was bookended by a devastating and fertile critique of artificial intelligence projects in the 1970's, and a passionate rejection of John McDowell's conceptualism in the first decade of the 21st century. And it may be that, like Socrates, the profundity of Dreyfus' simple, single-minded philosophy was not fully appreciated during his time.

So what was Dreyfus' fundamental insight? Put simply, it boils down to the thesis that we've been thinking about *ourselves* all wrong. There is, he observed, a conception of the human being and the human psyche that is so deep to Western analytic philosophy as to be all but invisible. According to this conception, humans are essentially rational, individual agents. In *What Computers Can't Do* (1979), Dreyfus refers to this conception of human nature as the Platonic picture, and in his 2005 Presidential address to the American Philosophical Association he discussed it in terms of the "Myth of the Mental." But though his views and his vocabulary evolved over time, Dreyfus consistently and strenuously rejected each element of the entrenched, Platonic, mind-first picture of the human being, and developed substantive alternatives to them all, drawing on his own, sometimes idiosyncratic – and initially autodidactic – understanding of phenomenology and existentialism.

Dreyfus argued that, rather than being *individual*, *agential*, and *rational*, human beings are *embedded*, *absorbed*, and *embodied*. Drawing on Heidegger's conception of lived existence as *Dasein*, Dreyfus argued that human individuality as it is represented by the Platonic picture is an exaggeration and a distortion. As Dreyfus saw it, human beings are embedded in our world like a knot is embedded in the middle of a fishing net. Any separateness from the world that we might possess is similar to the way in which one knot can – and cannot – be distinguished from the rest of the net.[1] Human agency, too, is nothing like the "Platonic" picture would have it. We are rarely

[*] This chapter is dedicated, with deep gratitude, to the memory of Hubert L. Dreyfus. We are grateful to an audience at the 2017 Southeastern Epistemology Conference, held at Florida State University, for helpful feedback on an earlier draft.

[1] In addition to the works cited here, see also Dreyfus (1991, 2000, and 2014 (especially Chapters 1 and 9)). Dreyfus' interpretation of Heidegger is controversial and by and large not in keeping with the consensus reading of Heidegger in the phenomenological tradition; for more on this see Braver (2013, 145ff.), Wrathall (2014), and Wrathall and Malpas (2000a, 2000b). On the self as a node in a net, compare Arne Naess (1973), who was also influenced by Heidegger.

– and never ideally – self-directed, explicitly purposive agents. Instead, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's perceptual, body-first conception of action, Dreyfus argued that we are responsive, self-forgetful, "absorbed copers" (in Heidegger's phrase), whenever we function both normally (competently) and expertly.

Finally, Dreyfus relied on phenomenology and his own acuity to reject the Platonic picture of human rationality itself, beginning by casting doubt on the role of that picture in early AI research. According to the Platonic picture, human intelligence is fundamentally calculative, computational, or rule-based, involving explicit and codifiable thought, the paradigm of which is inferential reasoning. But according to Dreyfus, this picture construes rationality itself in a rationalistic and thus distorted way. Human intelligence, he argued, can only be properly understood in light of the *embodied* quality of human being-in-the-world. When we attend to humankind's characteristic embodiment, we see that human intelligence is first and foremost, and most fundamentally, *practical* as opposed to theoretical in nature. Because of this, the elevation of theoretical rationality that is the bedrock of the Western philosophical tradition is a profound mistake. For theory proceeds from, depends upon, and ultimately is merely one species of—*doing*.

This brings us to the particular focus, and the primary interpretive claim, of the present essay. These three contrasts – individual vs. embedded, agential vs. absorbed, and rational vs. embodied – are closely connected in Dreyfus' thought. And his account of each of them, and their relationships to one another, evolved over time. But while it is not feasible here to discuss each of them in depth, we believe that they can be understood in terms of a single underlying conviction – another way to capture Dreyfus' burning fundamental insight. Dreyfus grasped, as very few philosophers do, *the sovereignty of practical intelligence over all other forms of intelligence.* It is this insight that led him to argue in the 1970's and 80's that computers cannot be intelligent because they lack bodies. The same insight led him likewise in the 1990's to develop an account of embodied intentionality that does not presuppose aboutness, or representational content. And it led him, finally, in the early 2000's to develop an account of action and practical wisdom that does not depend on deliberation or purposive agency. Ultimately, Dreyfus' preoccupation with doing justice to the sovereignty of the practical led him to forsake the contested terminology of practical reason, action, and intention altogether, and he couched his positive views instead in terms of practical skill, practical expertise, phronesis, and skilled, absorbed, or embodied coping.

The remainder of this essay will focus primarily on Dreyfus' late-stage contributions to practical philosophy and philosophy of action, as represented by his critical engagement with John McDowell and John Searle, and by the alternatives that he proposed to their respective theories of mind and action. In our view this portion of his life work constitutes the fruition of Dreyfus' sustained but developing commitment to the sovereignty of the practical. His views in this domain are radical, but they are more plausible and much less easily dismissed than it may seem at first pass.

II. Embodied Intentionality vs. The "Standard Story"

In his 2005 address to the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association (subsequently published under the title "Overcoming the Myth of the Mental"), Dreyfus advanced the following bold theses:

- That in skilled action or skilled "coping", human beings respond to relevant features of their situation in a way that does not involve any *representation* of these features or the goals in virtue of which they are relevant, and that indeed does not normally involve the mind at all.
- That skilled action therefore does not depend on any psychologically mediated "causal chain from input to response" (Dreyfus 2005, 107).
- That instead, skilled coping consists in a *direct* (immediate or psychologically unmediated), absorbed, and self-forgetful *responsiveness* that depends on our embodied capacities and the features of the physical and social environments that we engage with.

These theses were couched in the form of a criticism of John McDowell's exquisitely nuanced form of conceptualism about the mind (*Mind and World* 1996). The core claim of *Mind and World* is that "conceptual capacities … are already at work in experiences themselves," in an avowedly "demanding" sense of conceptual capacities according to which a concept is essentially something that "can be exploited in active thinking, thinking that is open to reflection about its own rational credentials" (1996, 47). So for McDowell, perception and action are permeated with rationality, with understanding, with "logos" as he often calls it, and his view could not be more deeply antithetical to the ideas that Dreyfus spent his career passionately defending.

Given the influence and stature of *Mind and World*, it must have felt to Dreyfus in 2005 as if he had gained very little ground indeed against the Platonic picture. And in the context of his decades-long struggle to resist "the whole conceptual framework which assumes that an explanation of human behavior can and must take the Platonic form" (1979, 232), his rather scandalous description of McDowell's grand reconciliation as "a vulture … feed[ing] off the carcass of the Myth of the Given," barely rises to the level of polemic (2005, 53). Yet throughout his exchange with McDowell, Dreyfus was not only playing the role of gadfly. He was also continuing to develop a positive philosophy of practice and action that he had already given substantive expression in his earlier work on action theory, especially while engaging with his UC Berkeley colleague John Searle's theories of mind and action. For example, in "Heidegger's Critique of the Husserl/Searle Account of Intentionality," Dreyfus had begun to develop his own account of absorbed coping, which, he said, involves "a kind of intentionality that does not involve content at all" (1993, 77).

Intentionality that does not involve content? Dreyfus was aware of how strange this would sound. Philosophers of mind standardly use the word 'intentional' to refer to the fact that "mental states like perceiving, believing, desiring, fearing, doubting, etc. are always about something, i.e. directed at something under some description" (77). Intentionality is thus normally an essentially conceptual, intrinsically mind-involving notion. But absorbed coping, Dreyfus proposed, manifests "a more fundamental sort of intentionality" that is embodied (or bodily) *and yet still intelligent*. It is a sensitive, engaged, dynamic *orientation* of oneself in one's practical and epistemic milieu (77). This kind of embodied intentionality does not admit of a sharp distinction between mind and world at all, let alone one which conceives of the mind, as McDowell did, primarily or exclusively in terms of *logos*, or conceptual or rational capacities. Absorbed copers are inextricably embedded in their world. And for that reason, Dreyfus' conception of absorbed coping also does not admit of a sharp and exhaustive distinction between "mind-to-world" and "world-to-mind" directions of fit and causation, as in the account Searle had worked out in his 1983 book, *Intentionality*.

At the core of Searle's account of intentional action is a subtle parallel between the kinds of representational states and causal transactions involved in perception and action, respectively. According to Searle, a perceptual experience (1) has a *mind-to-world* direction of fit, since it is a state that is accurate insofar as it matches or "fits" how things are anyway in the world, and (2) is the result of a process with a *world-to-mind* direction of causation, since a person counts as being in a perceptual state only if "the way the world is *makes* [the person] see it that way" (Searle 1983, 96). By contrast, in intentional action (2') the direction of causation is *mind-to-world*, since in acting a person makes *the world* to be a certain way, and (1') the direction of fit is *world-to-mind*, since action is successful insofar as its result matches or "fits" the agent's intention. For Dreyfus, by contrast, because the absorbed, expert subject is embedded in the world, like a node in a net she is *pulled* to action by her world as much as she pushes it into this or that shape.[2] The kind of skillful activity found in absorbed coping is not a matter of *making* the world outside so that it accords with an internal representation of it, any more than perception is just a matter of *taking* things in so as to generate an accurate internal representation of what is outside. Instead, both are reciprocal. Just as perception is an *active* process wherein we explore the world to get it to show up for us, so absorbed coping is *responsive*, attuned; it is a way of being in touch with what one's surroundings call for and afford.[3]

We can further clarify Dreyfus' account of skillful, embodied coping by contrasting it in more detail with Searle's representational account of intentional action. Searle's account of intentional action centers, first, on the following pair of theses:

(A) That an action is intentional only if the agent is in a *mental state* that represents the purpose or goal of her action;
(B) That this mental state is the *cause* of the bodily movement whereby the agent acts as she intends to.

While the details of Searle's account are controversial, (A) and (B) represent commitments which have been widely accepted by analytic philosophers since the influential work of Donald Davidson (1980). Indeed, David Velleman (1992, 461) has called the picture summed up by (A) and (B) the "Standard Story" of action. Searle also defended three further claims which are, in some version, widely accepted by analytic action theorists:

(C) That the mental state which represents the purpose or goal of an agent's action is *internal* to the agent—i.e. it is something that can exist whether or not she acts;
(D) That in acting intentionally, an agent enjoys an *experience* that represents her action as the cause of her bodily movement; and
(E) That "at any point in a [person's] conscious life he knows without observation the answer to the question, 'What are you now doing?'" (Searle 1983, 90)—at least where this concerns the descriptions under which the person's action is intentional.[4]

Dreyfus, for his part, challenged each one of these claims, arguing that *none* of them are supported by the phenomenology of purposive activity, and insisting that to the extent that they have a basis

[2] See Merleau-Ponty (2012), 100-155.
[3] See Gehrman (2014).
[4] Notably, in her seminal work *Intention* (1963) G.E.M. Anscombe flatly rejects each of (A) through (D). The language of *knowledge without observation*, in contrast, is due to Anscombe (1963, 13).

in the logic of our ordinary action-descriptions or the psychology of "common sense" this is only because our ordinary self-understanding has been corrupted by the categories of Cartesian psychology – that is, by the Platonic, mind-first conception of human beings as rational, individual agents who happen to inhabit a body.

Let us begin with theses (C), (D) and (E), as these are the aspects of Searle's analytic treatment that are most directly amenable to phenomenological scrutiny. For present purposes, we can understand Dreyfus as subjecting these standard action-theoretic commitments to phenomenological scrutiny in order to make room in philosophers' minds for them to entertain a substantive alternative to the "Standard Story" about action, as represented by (A) and (B). After discussing Dreyfus' critical dissent from (C), (D) and (E), we will sketch what we take to be his proposed alternative to the Standard Story: his account of skilled, embodied coping, and the phenomenological grounds that he advanced in favor of it.

Consider first thesis (D). According to Searle (1983, 87-88) there are "characteristic experiences" of an intentional action like raising your arm, and the intentional content of these experiences has a causal and self-referential character: an experience of acting *represents itself as the cause* of the bodily movement whereby the agent succeeds in doing what she intends. Against this, Dreyfus argues that if we "return to the phenomena" and consider the lived character of human activity in a way that does not take for granted the distorting lens of the Myth of the Mental, we find that "in a wide variety of situations human beings relate to the world in an organized purposive manner without the constant accompaniment of a representational state which specifies what the action is aimed at accomplishing" (Dreyfus 1993, 83). He gives a range of examples: "skillful activity like playing tennis; habitual activity like driving to the office or brushing one's teeth; casual unthinking activity like rolling over in bed or making gestures while one is speaking; and spontaneous activity such as fidgeting and drumming one's fingers during a dull lecture" (ibid.).

All of these activities involve movement that is organized, purposive, and exquisitely sensitive to environmental contingencies. Yet there is *no* phenomenological support for the claim that there are "characteristic experiences" of acting in any of these ways—let alone experiences that represent themselves as the cause of one's movements. As Dreyfus observed, when these forms of action involve any sort of experience at all, it is not an experience of oneself (or one's mental states) as *causing* one's activity, but rather of a direct responsiveness to the environment whereby "[o]ne's activity is completely geared into the demands of the situation" (ibid., 81). Indeed, there is more evidence in the phenomenology of expert action for saying that the world *causes me to act* by eliciting an expert response, as there is for attributing causality *to me* via my explicit, self-consciously representational experience of the situation.

Dreyfus' argument against thesis (E) proceeds in a similar way. This argument is simplest regarding habitual, casual, and spontaneous activities like those listed just above: it is a common occurrence to *find* that one has been gesturing wildly, idly drumming one's fingers, or even making the correct turns on a route to the office, without having known that one was doing these things. And yet there is usually a purpose or goal intrinsic to these kinds of activities, which the person who engages in them would treat as her own. One might say, for example, that one was gesturing wildly for emphasis, or that one turned right to avoid the traffic on Sunset, without thereby committing to the self-awareness that (E) stipulates must attend intentional actions. And Dreyfus argued that the same holds even for the skillful exercise of more complex capacities: for example,

as an expert tennis player returning a shot "I cannot represent how I am turning my racket since I do not know what I do when I return the ball. I may once have been told to hold my racket perpendicular to the court, and I may have succeeded in doing so, but now experience has sculpted my swing to the situation in a far more subtle and appropriate way than I could have achieved as a beginner following this rule" (Dreyfus 1993, 84-85).

This example illustrates how a person may act skillfully without knowledge of the details of her movements—yet surely these details are not "blind" or lacking in purpose. Here Dreyfus loved to cite the testimony of the great basketball player Larry Bird, who claimed that "[a] lot of times, I've passed the basketball and not realized I've passed it until a moment or so later" (quoted in Dreyfus 1993, 84). This phenomenon supports a construal of an expert's self-knowledge quite at odds with the one that Searle assumes. For Dreyfus, even *without* having non-observational knowledge of her own intentional activity, the expert does what she does in precisely the way that she does it *in order* to do it as well – as expertly – as possible.

Of course, Dreyfus did not claim that purposive activity *never* involves experience of one's movements or non-observational knowledge of what one does. On the contrary, he argued that forms of conscious self-monitoring are essential to successful activity in certain situations, including when acquiring a new skill or exercising a well-learned skill in difficult or unfamiliar circumstances. It is primarily in situations like these, he says, that one acts with "a sense of effort with the condition of satisfaction that [this] effort causes the appropriate goal-directed movements"—a way of self-consciously representing our actions that "certainly [has] a place in the overall explanation of how it is that we manage to act in a wide range of situations" (1993, 89). We might add that self-conscious representation of one's actions also has a place in the explanation of how we manage to pass our skills along to others through explicit instruction. Thus an expert glass blower might say to an apprentice, after fabricating an object, "I twisted my wrist at that time to round off the globe", or "I did this because it was the best way to get the shape right", *without* its being the case that any "in order to"- or "because"- or "for the sake of"-type thoughts were part of the process of carrying the action out. Indeed, in many cases these thoughts would be only a distraction in the course of her skilled activity, and will be available to the agent only when the action has been successfully completed in response to the situation and she is absorbed in a quite different activity – namely, the activity of verbal instruction of an apprentice to her craft. The mistake of (E) is to conclude that the capacities for self-monitoring and self-explanation that we draw on in these *special* situations are also part of the explanation of purposive activity in the more ordinary situation when all is going smoothly, the skill being drawn on is well-learned, and there is no particular pressure to examine or articulate the structure of one's action.[5]

Consider finally Searle's thesis (C), which holds that what makes an action intentional must be something *internal* to the agent's mind—a representation that can exist independently of her bodily movements and their effects, which in turn can exist without the representation. For Searle (1983, 89-90), this independence of intention from movement is shown by a pair of cases: a person whose

[5] As Sean Kelly puts it, "just as the child assumes that the refrigerator light must always be on, since it is on every time he looks, so too our proposed analyst has claimed that since the intention to type an *f* is explicit when the subject is paying attention to his activity, so too it must have been among the conditions that characterized the content of the activity even when he was not paying attention to it. This is a bad principle in the case of absorbed activity, just as in the case of refrigerator lights" (2005, 20).

arm has been anaesthetized and then held down may, if his eyes are closed, have a mistaken experience as of moving his arm; and a person whose arm is made to move directly by stimulation of his motor cortex will be such that his arm moves, but without the experience characteristic of *his* moving his arm intentionally.

Against this analysis, Dreyfus would argue that these cases do not present us with anything like the *usual* phenomenon of moving purposively in a world we are "geared into" by our interests, and in response to active solicitations from the environment. Except in moments where we are forced (by failure, by the novelty of a situation, or by something else) to adopt an explicitly self-aware, reflexive perspective on what we are doing, in purposive activity we are so thoroughly embedded in the world that what happens "in us" when we act is not a privileged domain that can be treated as separate from what takes place in our "surroundings"—any more than the boundary between an organism and its environment can be treated as a categorical distinction rather than an occasionally useful heuristic. Indeed, even in moments where we do step back and reflect on what we are doing, we are usually really just shifting from being absorbed in one activity to being absorbed in another – say, shifting from driving the car to problem-solving about some sticky aspect of driving the car. But in pulling back from absorbed engagement with driving we are only nestling into another absorbed activity; in this case, a reflexive mental process of problem-solving or diagnosis. In all such cases, we function as nodes in a net rather than as fully separable minds that happen to occupy bodies but can in principle be separated from them. The binary subject-object or agent-world distinction that is implied by (C), and which the analytic tradition takes for granted, severely distorts the phenomenology of *everyday* activity, even if we can think of cases where the agent-world contrast is more heavily accentuated.

III. A Sisyphean task?

Dreyfus avails himself of resources from "the phenomenology of everyday expertise" to criticize theses (C) - (E), and to propose substantive alternative accounts of the relevant phenomena (2005). But are those resources sufficient to ground a substantive alternative to the "Standard Story" of (A) and (B)? When he sought to slay the dragon of the computational theory of mind in *What Computers Can't Do,* Dreyfus acknowledged that doing so would (at least at first) be a Sisyphean task:

> … the impetus gained by the mutual reinforcement of two thousand years of tradition and its product, the most powerful device ever invented by man [namely, the digital computer], is simply too great to be arrested [or] deflected. …The most that can be hoped is that we become aware that the direction this impetus has taken … is not the only possible direction; … that there may be a way of understanding human reason that explains both why the computer paradigm is irresistible and why it must fail. (1979, 232)

In the AI context Dreyfus hoped, not to replace or refute the "computer paradigm", but rather to resist and to counteract its distorting effects by giving an *at least equally plausible* phenomenological description of human reason. Of course he thought the computer paradigm was hopelessly wrong, and he pulled no punches when saying so, and he tried vigorously to make his

reader agree.[6] But in the end he was consistently most interested, not in refutation, but in exploring the alternative conceptions of the relevant human phenomena afforded by the phenomenological tradition.

When it comes to his account of skilled, absorbed coping and practical expertise, and especially when it comes to resisting the Standard Story about intentional action, we propose that Dreyfus is best understood to have the same aims and priorities. That is: while he argued forcefully against the mentalistic models of action and practical intelligence that he sought to disrupt, he was in the end most interested in presenting an *at least equally plausible* phenomenological account of the relevant human phenomena – a sort of differential diagnosis to show that the Standard Story is "not the only possible direction" that an explanation can take. With this in mind we will devote the present section to drawing out and shoring up the sheer plausibility of Dreyfus' bold and apparently radical claims about human practical intelligence and activities, where they can be seen to present a potentially satisfying and intelligible alternative to the Standard Story.

Recall that the "Standard Story" of action as represented by Searlean theses (A) and (B) above holds that intentional action is bodily movement caused by an intention. Especially for analytic philosophers who are familiar with the terms of the Standard Story, there is a deep intuitive appeal to the idea that *purposive* activity must be activity that is done *with* a purpose—and that this, in turn, requires that the action involve some causal contribution from a (perhaps self-consciously entertained and internal) mental representation of its aim or end. But there is an intuitive appeal to Dreyfus' conception of practical intelligence as well, rooted in the undeniably familiarity of the phenomena to which he draws our attention. We all know what it's like to be wholly absorbed in the flow of performing an activity at which we are adept. We've all played a sport or ridden a bike or used a tool or implement (say, a pen) in a self-forgetful, fluid, manifestly absorbed way. And we all know the difference between absorbed expert competence at such activities, and the awkward, halting, deliberate way we engage in the same activities when we are learning (or otherwise not adept).

Many of Dreyfus' best-known examples of absorbed, expert coping are things which are already readily understood as primarily embodied as opposed to primarily mind- or reason-involving. Thus for example he often mentions playing soccer, riding a bike, wielding a hammer (Heidegger's most famous example), and other examples of what Aristotle might have thought of as technical expertise (Heidegger 1996, 64ff., Aristotle 2001, 179). But the familiarity of absorbed practical phenomenology in some of the more obviously embodied areas of life is the thin edge of a wedge

[6] Whether Dreyfus was correct in his unconditional rejection of computational mental models in the AI context is a question that we will not address here. But it can be noted, briefly, that even if the sheer computational power of present-day computers is a *sine qua non* of their learning capacities, it was the exclusively computational paradigm of the mind, and not the interest in increasing computational power per se, that needed to change if computers were to begin to simulate human intelligence more convincingly and effectively. And if computers have developed an astonishing capacity to learn, to amend their stores of knowledge in holistic ways, and generally to simulate other highly context-responsive aspects of human practical intelligence, that is precisely because they have been given a simulated *context* in which to learn. Thus if Dreyfus thought that "as far as we can tell … a 'machine' which could use a natural language and recognize complex patterns would have to have a body so that it could be at home in the world," it's because he underestimated the extent to which computers might be given *virtual worlds* in which to be at home (1979, 304).

that can, if we allow it, separate us gradually from the Platonic conception of ourselves as rational, agential individuals.

To this end, we can begin by observing first that the same absorbed quality that characterizes one's competent use of a hammer or pen also characterizes many activities which, on the Platonic picture, constitutively involve the intellect. Expert chess-playing, for instance, is also a paradigm for Dreyfus of absorbed, expert action. And surely playing chess is a highly intellectual activity if anything is! But perhaps chess is not the best example on which to rest the case for Dreyfus' view. For although chess is not embodied in the way that, say, tennis is embodied, chess is nonetheless strongly associated with mental aberration. When the layperson thinks of chess they likely think of the mystique of genius and the fascinating but inscrutable superpowers of *idiots savants*. And Dreyfus wanted us to see that not just exceptional, inscrutable expertise such as possessed only by a rare few, but also normal everyday expertise, such as possessed by virtually everyone, has the absorbed, embedded phenomenology that disrupts the mind-first conception of action. If we are to find Dreyfus' account of absorbed coping plausible, then need to see that absorbed phenomenology characterizes expertise in general, including even the most familiar reason- or mind-involving activities of competent experts.

Let us accordingly consider some of the activities that are typically part of being a professional academic philosopher. Here we can think of teaching a class in one's area of expertise, constructing a proof in logic, writing a paper, or posing a question following a colleague's oral presentation. These are the kinds of activities with respect to which virtually all academic philosophers are expert. If Dreyfus is right that skilled coping is both *normally* and *ideally* absorbed, then even these paradigmatically intellect-involving activities ought to exhibit the absorbed phenomenology of embodied, engaged intentionality. That is, if Dreyfus is right, then in some real way even these paradigmatically intellectual activities *don't involve the mind* when they are carried out by an expert.

To defend this *prima facie* incredible claim, Dreyfus might start by doubling down on his phenomenological methodological commitments. Responsible philosophers must defer first and foremost to the phenomena, he might say. And it is impossible to observe the involvement of the mind – that is, impossible to observe the involvement of self-conscious, self-aware, deliberate capacities for reason-based or concept-based guidance – in absorbed, fully engaged activities. For the minute we adopt the self-aware, concept-guided stance of observer of our own actions and internal states, we are no longer absorbed, and the phenomenon that we sought to observe has disappeared.[7] For this reason, there is not and cannot be evidence *in the phenomenology of expertise itself* for the involvement of the mind in expert actions – even expert actions like writing up a good philosophical argument in defense of a carefully worked out position. Rather than striving in vain to adopt an observer stance that instantly extinguishes that which we are trying to observe, Dreyfus argued that "We need to understand perception and action as they are when we are involved in acting, instead of imposing on them how they seem to us when we reflect" (2005, 130).

This line of argument is so far only negative: it tells us where (and how) *not* to look for evidence of the mind's involvement in expert activity, but doesn't yet provide any positive evidence in favor of Dreyfus' alternative account. So let us now ask: how *should* we understand action "as it is when

[7] See Noë (2013, 190).

we are involved in acting"? Well, consider what you are doing when you are giving a lecture or leading a discussion on a familiar topic. (Non-academics can substitute an appropriately intellectual activity at which they have the relevant degree of expertise.) You are, for example, speaking certain words at a certain pace and with a certain cadence of emphasis. You are making certain kinds of eye contact with others in the room. You are using language in a way that aims to communicate clearly and (perhaps) eloquently. You are monitoring the reactions and interactions of the group, and inserting yourself into the developing social events as they take place, in a way that is intended to further the standing background objectives that structure and explain your actions in the first place.

Now, in doing all of this, *where is your attention?* Where is your focus? Your focus is on what you are doing. But your focus is not on what you are doing in the way that a peer observer tasked with writing a teaching evaluation would focus on you teaching the class. You are not attending to yourself as agent; you are attending as agent to what you do. Your focus is *in* what you are doing; your attention is taken up by the activity, and other possible candidates for your attention (including self-awareness) are ignored, or postponed, or otherwise recede.

This focused, active, attuned, attentive, absorbed kind of activity *just is* (Dreyfus might say) what it is to act purposively with skill. It is to realize absorbed intentionality. In order to be skillfully or expertly teaching purposively, *you have to actually be teaching* – not thinking about teaching, not attending to yourself teaching as an observer might, not describing what it is to teach, not intending to teach, not planning how to teach another person to teach in the way that you are currently doing. No, in order to be teaching skillfully you have to actually be doing: *teaching*. If you are doing what you do "at someone else's prompting" (Aristotle 2001, 114), under the guidance of a set of rules, while narrating what you do either to yourself or aloud – you are divided in your purpose, divided in your attention, not "all in" (so to speak) on the action which was ostensibly what you were purposely doing. If so, then in the very dividedness of your attention, you do what you do in a less expert (because less absorbed) way.

IV. Practical Wisdom without Rationality

For Dreyfus, absorbed coping is possible only when a skill is fully integrated into the subject's way of being in the world. By contrast, less-than-absorbed, less-than-embodied, less-than-embedded action is not yet truly chosen in this way; it is not yet fully, autonomously purposive or intentional because it has not yet become *part of you* – and what are you but a particular way of being in the world?

This thought may help us to see how Dreyfus could respond to a classic argument of Donald Davidson's that many philosophers take to count decisively in favor of the Standard Story.[8] A well-known passage in Elizabeth Anscombe's *Intention* defines intentional actions as those actions "to which a certain sense of the question 'Why?' is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting" (Anscombe 1963, 9). While most philosophers have not followed—or perhaps even really understood—Anscombe's own account of what it is to act for a reason, there is no denying that the dominant tradition in analytic

[8] For this argument, see Davidson (1980).

philosophy of action has followed her in thinking that the concept of *acting for a reason* deserves a central place in any philosophical account of what it is to act intentionally. And it is this working assumption that accounts for the dominance of the Standard Story of intentional action as bodily movement that is caused by an intention: for how can one *act for* a reason without having this reason somewhere "in mind"? And what would it be to act for *this* reason—as opposed to another one that is also in mind—except for this reason to make an appropriate (presumably, causal) difference to what one does?[9]

Dreyfus' account seems at first especially unable to account for these aspects of everyday action-explanation. If the mind and its (representational or conceptualized) purposes and intentions are not somehow involved in guiding the things one does in an absorbed fashion, then there does not seem to be anything there to ground an intention-revealing answer to the question "Why did you do that?" Compounding the problem, Dreyfus frequently presents his views in a way that suggests that he is denying a role to the agent in choosing, causing, or generating her own actions.[10] For example in "A Merleau-Pontian Critique of Husserl's and Searle's Representationalist Accounts of Action," he says:

> Merleau-Ponty argues that what we might call absorbed coping does not require that the agent's movements be governed by an intention in action that represents the action's success conditions, i.e. what the agent is trying to achieve. Rather, in absorbed coping the agent's body is led to move so as to reduce a sense of deviation from a satisfactory gestalt without the agent knowing what that satisfactory gestalt will be like in advance of achieving it. Thus, in absorbed coping, rather than a sense of trying to achieve success, one has a sense of being drawn towards an equilibrium. (2000, 293)

In passages like this one, experts start to seem like zombies, or like driftwood in a stream, or like iron filings in the presence of so many magnets. And if so then the Anscombean question "Why did you do that?" might seem, as she put it, to be appropriately "*refused application*" (1963, 11) in absorbed coping—in which case it is not at all clear that *anything* distinguishes the intentional from the non- or un-intentional on Dreyfus' account.

Let us attempt to address this concern on Dreyfus' behalf. The *phenomena*, he will insist, as opposed to any grammatical test, are the criteria that must distinguish intentional expert coping from other ways of being in the world. And in many cases this is a plausible claim. It is easy, for example, to think of ways in which the actions of an expert differ characteristically from the actions of a novice or an incompetent bungler. For Dreyfus, the real challenge is the automaton. How can we distinguish, *on phenomenological grounds alone*, between the absorbed, expert coper, and the absent-minded embodied person who is operating on autopilot?

Let us consider the question in the context of a specific example. Suppose that on Monday you drive your manual transmission sedan to work along your usual route. You are relaxed and well-slept, and your cell phone is tucked virtuously away in your bag in the back seat. You keep your eyes on the road, you don't grind the gears, and you push it with the yellow lights just as much as

[9] As Davidson famously put it, unless we treat reason-giving explanations as causal "we are without an analysis of the 'because' in 'He did it because …', where we go on to name a reason" (1980, 11).
[10] See Braver (2013), Noë (2013), and Gehrman (2016).

you feel is wise, no more, no less. Now it is Tuesday. Overtired and engaged in a voice-texting argument with your spouse, you grind the gears several times getting into second, need to slam on the brakes at least once to avoid running a red, and pull in to your spot with the gas light on only to realize that on Tuesdays you have a standing appointment across town and you ought not to have been driving to work in the first place.

As with Dreyfus' favorite comparison between the deft and sure activity of the expert and the hesitant and fumbling behavior of the novice, there are many familiar and clear-cut differences in the phenomenology of these two scenarios, from both the first- and the third-person perspective. On Monday, you are coping in an absorbed, expert fashion under a number of descriptions: shifting gears, driving to work, being a defensive driver, etc. Similar to our earlier discussion of the expert philosopher, as you do these things your focus, your attention is on what you are doing under these descriptions. (That is – you are not focusing on them 'under these descriptions'; rather, you are absorbed in the activities for which these description are appropriate. If Dreyfus is right then you need not be contemporaneously *conceiving of them* in any way at all.) On this particular morning, the focus of your absorbed attention is in the tasks of navigating the roads, shifting your gears, getting to work in a timely manner. There will be ways that it feels to you to be engaged in doing these things, and there will be ways that another person who is engaged in observing you closely might be able to tell that you are doing them in an absorbed, expert way. Your passenger might notice, for example, that there is never a lurch in momentum when you shift from second to third gear. They may hear a small chuckle or see you lean forward slightly when you hit a yellow light at just the right moment to justify a small burst of speed. They may pick up on the fact that you are relaxed.

On Tuesday, what are you doing? You are certainly absorbed in *something*. But what? Not the same things you were absorbed in the morning before. Instead, your focus is in something else: the voice-texting argument, resentment about your lack of sleep, and the glowing gas light on the dashboard. These things command your attention and assume the place of proximal nodes in your net, embedding you in the world a quite different way as compared to the way you were embedded on Monday, when the gear shifter, the road, the overall drive were your proximal nodes. On Tuesday, distracted and distanced from the driving-related activities, you grind the gears. You fail to time the lights well. You do not drive where you set out to go. And the phenomenology of these activities will be very different from the phenomenology of what were in some sense the same activities during Monday's drive, both from a first-person perspective (the stress, the sweaty palms, the constant guilty peeking to proofread the latest voice texted zinger before hitting send) and from a third-person perspective (the palpable tension, the vehicular lurches, the conspicuous absence of chuckles, the eyes on the dash and the phone more than the road, etc.).

On the phenomenological account that we have just sketched, it is not as if absorbed, attentive defensive driving is reason-involving in a way that driving distractedly is not. For each of these activities is in its own way embodied and embedded in the world, and thus absorbed in its own set of practical problems. And this similarity is what gave rise to the concern that there is no good substitute for Anscombe's 'special sense of the question "Why?" on Dreyfus' embodied account. But the subject in this example is absorbed in very different things on Monday and Tuesday, and the phenomenology of their activities manifests this difference. We can say: the drive on Monday is an example of expert Dreyfusian intentional action; it is expert absorbed coping. The drive on

Tuesday is *not* an example of expert Dreyfusian intentional action, though the voice texting argument might be. We suspect that anybody who thinks that the phenomenology of these two cases will be first- or third-personally indistinguishable has no direct experience of the relevant sort.

We also acknowledge that some reservations about Dreyfus' views will persist to whatever extent his interlocutors remain in the grip of the Platonic picture of humankind (and we include ourselves in this). For if our conception of intentionality is that it is essentially conceptual, representational, and self-aware, then naturally any view to the contrary will seem to lose the phenomenon of intentionality itself. And the same goes for agency, for agents and their purposive activity. But if Dreyfus had meant simply to reject or refute the Platonic picture of human mentality, he would have had no need to recruit the vocabulary and conceptual frames of phenomenology to do so. He could have simply adopted the stance of skeptic, so to speak from *inside* the Platonic tradition, arguing that rationality, individuality, and agency are not characteristics of human beings. Instead, Dreyfus sought to save the practical phenomena, and to focus attention on a very different way of understanding ourselves: as embedded, absorbed, and embodied beings. And this implies that he believed the phenomena of purposive human practical life are there to be saved. The embedded subject still interacts with her world; she is not merely acted upon. The absorbed coper still strives purposively, and can succeed (or fail) to achieve what she aims to achieve. The embodied coper still attends to her world and comports herself in a way that is informed by intelligent appreciation of that world. For Dreyfus, practical intelligence is not an illusion. It is, as we put it above, *sovereign* over all other forms of intelligence, and that is why the former cannot be satisfying explained in terms of the latter. It remains for us to work with the materials he offered to see whether we can make sense of absorbed intentionality in terms that he would have found acceptable.

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