

MIND, BODY, AND WORLD:  
RESOLVING THE DREYFUS-MCDOWELL DEBATE

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By

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ABSTRACT

In recent years Hubert Dreyfus and John McDowell have engaged one another in several fora, debating the pervasiveness of our conceptual experience. Dreyfus offers arguments unique to the debate over nonconceptual content, claiming that our situated, skillful and embodied engagement with the world (or what he calls skillful coping) is an intentional, personal-level phenomenon that is inappropriate to and in fact serves as a ground for conceptual activity. McDowell responds alternately by defending the conceptual nature of skillful coping, claiming it to be orthogonal to his own conceptualist concerns, or by dismissing the relevance of the normative phenomena to which Dreyfus calls attention.

I argue that while McDowell is correct concerning the pervasively conceptual nature of human experience, he and Dreyfus both misunderstand the nature of the phenomena in question. Dreyfus is right to insist on the relevance of our skillful and unreflective bodily practices, but he misunderstands the relationship between coping and language specifically, and hence between coping and conceptuality more generally. This leaves him with a problematic dualism in the nature of human experience and understanding. On the other hand, McDowell lacks a phenomenologically plausible explanation of how conceptual capacities are operative even in unreflective activity, and likewise misses the intimate connection between coping, unreflective social norms, and conceptuality. The way forward lies in a more careful analysis of both reflective and unreflective experience together with a

recognition that possessing conceptual capacities—no less than possessing skillful, action-oriented bodies—changes the nature and content of perception.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the wake of my first semester as a graduate student in philosophy I had the privilege of attending the staged debate between Hubert Dreyfus and John McDowell at the 2006 American Philosophical Association's Eastern Division Conference. While I thoroughly enjoyed myself, I didn't realize then the retrospectively clear significance this debate would have for my own intellectual development and interests. Consequently, I would like to begin by acknowledging the philosophical "background conditions" that allowed this dissertation to be written—the lifetime of rigorous debate and analysis performed by these two scholars. It has been a genuine pleasure to study their works and argue with them both.

In trying to turn my personal musings into serious philosophical engagement with the issues of this debate, I could not have been more fortunate than I was to work with a committee composed of brilliant scholars who are themselves former students of Dreyfus and McDowell. Bill Blattner in particular has helped me along with incredible generosity and kindness, from before I was a graduate student and throughout the writing process—a mentor in every sense of the word. Mark Lance has perhaps taken my diverse interests and arguments more seriously than anyone else and has helped me to unite my genuinely pluralistic pursuits. And it was in Mark Wrathall's class that I first learned about and discovered a genuine passion for philosophy. I am incredibly grateful for my committee's time and dedication—particularly for their challenges and demands for rigor and clarity. Without their help this dissertation would have remained hopelessly inchoate.

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Far from a mere intellectual exercise, philosophy is inseparable from the rest of my life and an integral part of my own attempts to achieve *eudaimonia*. Consequently, the most important context for this dissertation has been my own family. I am especially grateful to my loving parents, Deborah and Randy Olsen for a lifetime of encouragement and stability. My uncle Jeff Olsen first gave me a glimpse of what it was to be a scholar and has always nurtured my intellectual interests.

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Deux excès: exclure la raison, n'admettre que la raison.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* 253

## CHAPTER ONE

### CONCEPTUALISM, PHENOMENOLOGY, AND EPISTEMIC ARCHITECTURE: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE DREYFUS-MCDOWELL DEBATE

The discussion which has developed out of the work of [Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein] has reached unparalleled articulation and sophistication as we enter the twenty-first century. The interesting debate between John McDowell and Hubert Dreyfus, and the way in which their differences have been clarified and refined, is an index of the progress we have made in recent decades.

-Charles Taylor<sup>1</sup>

#### **I. Beginning where they left off: characterizing the debate**

The debate between Hubert Dreyfus and John McDowell—beginning with Dreyfus’s 2005 APA Presidential Address, continuing at the 2006 Eastern APA, published with responses in *Inquiry*, and culminating in a recently published reprisal<sup>2</sup>—is significant not merely because it involves two leading figures in philosophy today, but even more on account of its fruitfully bringing into dialogue two disparate traditions that have a good deal to say to one

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<sup>1</sup> 2013: 87.

<sup>2</sup> Dreyfus’s initial foray can be found in “Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise,” (2005). McDowell’s part in the 2006 APA debate can be found in *Inquiry* 50 no. 4 as “What Myth?” (2007a), and Dreyfus’s part as “The Return of the Myth of the Mental” (2007a). Their responses are also found in the same issue, printed as “Response to Dreyfus” (2007b) and “Response to McDowell” (2007b). McDowell then wrote an essay titled “Avoiding the Myth of the Given” (2008a and 2008b), which is external to but bears directly on the themes developed in the debate and which will play a large role in our discussion. They have also written a recap and summary of their debate for Joseph Schear’s edited volume examining themes from the debate, *Mind, Reason and Being-in-the-World*, New York: Routledge (2013).

another. Some have pointed to Martin Heidegger's debate with Rudolf Carnap as the decisive point at which the analytic and continental traditions diverged.<sup>3</sup> While I believe the divide to have been far more sociological than substantively philosophical, it has nevertheless been a real divide, one that successfully filtered important figures and insights into one camp or the other. Thankfully, the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have seen a flurry of cross-over activity and a welcome narrowing of the divide.<sup>4</sup> The debate between McDowell and Dreyfus is perhaps the culmination of this process—a historical turning point wherein the rupture caused by that earlier debate is made obsolete.

Such appears to be the underlying motivation for Dreyfus's original critique of McDowell. While his Presidential Address focuses on what both the tradition and McDowell lack, he is also eager to acknowledge the similarities he sees, and he concludes the address with this remark:

The time is ripe to follow McDowell and others in putting aside the outmoded opposition between analytic and continental philosophy, to begin the challenging collaborative task of . . . work[ing] together to understand our grasp of reality from the ground up.<sup>5</sup>

It is in the same spirit that I analyze and evaluate the positions set out in their debate. The resolution that I ultimately argue for in this dissertation draws directly on both traditions.

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<sup>3</sup> See Friedman (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Due credit must be given to Hubert Dreyfus on this end, not simply for initiating the debate with McDowell, but for a career spent working to bridge the divide. He has not only doggedly engaged and criticized various philosophers on the basis of "continental" insights; he has likewise done more than any other single philosopher to make Heideggerian philosophy both accessible and relevant to mainstream contemporary philosophy.

<sup>5</sup> 2005: 19-20; the second half of the quotation is a rhetorical question in the original, the pragmatic status of which is accurately represented in the quotation.

John McDowell famously works out an epistemology that makes our knowledge and claims about the world accountable to the world without succumbing to what he calls (following Wilfrid Sellars) the “Myth of the Given.” In order to do so he argues that human experience is “conceptual all the way out.”<sup>6</sup> Hubert Dreyfus attacks this claim, arguing that our higher-order conceptual capacities supervene on our more pervasive practical capacities, or what Dreyfus calls skillful coping—an unreflective but normative, practical engagement with things that serves to make the world intelligible in the most basic sense.<sup>7</sup> In brief, Dreyfus argues that our ability to grasp the world conceptually—to do things like step back and think about the world propositionally or express judgments about specific features of the world—is a “top floor” intellectual capacity that is grounded in our skillful, embodied ability to have the world meaningfully before us at all. According to Dreyfus, the necessary “ground floor” of human interaction with the world consists in our skillful ability to be involved with things and practically make our way about the world. Even engaging in what seem to be conceptually saturated activities like philosophical debates are possible for us only because we are at the same time and in the background maintaining a skillful, embodied grip on the world, which allows us to have the world meaningfully before us,

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<sup>6</sup> 1994a.

<sup>7</sup> As Dreyfus’s insights get discussed in the contemporary literature, there is a tendency to shy away from his use of ‘skillful coping’ and substitute terms such as ‘unreflective action’ or ‘skillful bodily movement’ and the like (for example, see Rietveld (2010) and Montero (2010)). I find this move unfortunate; while on the one hand it makes it easier to correlate Dreyfus’s discussion with other discussions going on in the literature, it does so by flattening out the phenomenon that Dreyfus is attempting to point to. ‘Skillful coping’ as a term of art is sensitive to the fact that our skillful, unreflective actions are not merely a matter of action or movement, but are a matter of intelligent, intentional action by which we make our way about the world, come to grips with our immediate environment, and disclose the world to ourselves as intelligible. Hence, it carries with it the connotations important in the non-English terms used by continental philosophers. Consequently, I will retain Dreyfus’s term and discuss it more fully in Chapter Two.

granting the necessary context for our conceptual activity. Consequently, McDowell's claim that human experience is "conceptual all the way out" amounts to a claim that it is "upper stories all the way down."<sup>8</sup>

While Dreyfus begins the debate on the offensive, marshaling his phenomenological arguments against what he perceives as McDowell's overly intellectualist position, he spends much of the debate defending his claim that human experience is pervasively and at root both skillful and non-conceptual.<sup>9</sup> He concludes the debate in *Inquiry* with something of a plea that readers consider seriously this claim and its potential significance. By way of summing up his phenomenology of human practices and articulating the difficult challenge still facing his account, he states that 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...[the] world of facts, features, and data." That is, granting his claim that the world is made intelligible via non-conceptual coping, Dreyfus has yet to explain how this intelligible world is made apt for conceptual activity. He then claims that "the conceptualist can't give an account of how we

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<sup>8</sup> 2005: 1. At the end of the debate published in *Inquiry*, rather than maintaining the ground-floor/upper stories metaphor Dreyfus suggests a "horizontal" relationship of foreground versus background; at that point (putting words into Dreyfus's mouth), he accuses McDowell's account of being "foreground all the way back." More recently, Robert Hanna has taken up the "bottom-up" metaphor and strategy from a Kantian angle. He has argued that "essentially non-conceptual content constitutes the semantic and psychological substructure, or matrix, out of which the categorically normative a priori superstructure of epistemic rationality and practical rationality – Sellars's 'logical space of reasons' – grows," (2011): 328; see also (2008) and Hanna and Chadha (2009).

<sup>9</sup> Skillful coping is what Dreyfus would call (following Heidegger) a *primordial* phenomenon; that is, it characterizes the most direct and revealing way in which we encounter the world, and likewise enjoys a privileged status that is explanatorily prior to our other ways of encountering things (e.g., in reflection or linguistic expression). See (1991): 198-201 for his discussion of this term.

are absorbed in the world, while the phenomenologist can't account for what makes it possible for us to step back and observe it."<sup>10</sup>

Taking this as a trenchant summary of the debate as a whole, the purpose of this dissertation is to supply an answer to Dreyfus's challenge—not in the sense of a partisan defense or refutation, but primarily in the sense of heeding Dreyfus's call to move forward collaboratively. Specifically, I will argue for an account of human experience and intelligibility, compatible with McDowell's conceptualist epistemology, that accounts for the pervasive phenomenon of skillful coping, but without the mysterious dualism that (I will show) confuses Dreyfus's position. What's more, I will make use of Dreyfus's phenomenological tools in order to make sense of McDowell's mysterious claim that conceptual capacities are "operative" in perception and other skillful activities, even if they are not being exercised, such that both perception and our skillful embodied capacities can be understood as genuinely conceptual. In doing so, I mean not to simply work out a position that technically avoids stepping on the philosophic toes of the two positions in question, but rather to provide an answer that is committed to rigorous conceptual analysis as well as an accurate description of lived human experience.

In order to accomplish this, I will first criticize both philosophers' positions as articulated during and subsequent to the debate. This includes defending and developing McDowell's conceptualism vis-à-vis Dreyfus's phenomenological criticisms. Second, I will argue for a reconciliation of the two positions that rests on a more comprehensive phenomenology of human experience and intelligibility. Specifically, I will argue that the key to accounting for both the richness of our embodied experience and the way in which

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<sup>10</sup> (2007a): 364.

the world is conceptually articulated is a more careful analysis of the phenomenon of language and the way that it not only picks out or expresses features of one's experience, but also is holistically integrated with our other skillful bodily capacities and perceptual modalities, and thus contributes to the fundamental disclosure of the world.<sup>11</sup>

If I am right, then on the one hand, Dreyfus is correct to urge contemporary philosophers to take phenomenology and embodied coping seriously, even if he misunderstands the relationship between that coping and language, and hence between coping and conceptuality. On the other hand, McDowell's account and his approach turns out to be the more fruitful, despite his clumsy phenomenology and the absence from his account of an explanation of how it is that the world is experienced as conceptually articulate. The way forward lies in a careful resolution of the two positions set forth in the debate.

In this chapter I will set the stage for this reconciliation by first outlining the significant and easily overlooked agreement that exists between Dreyfus and McDowell. Doing so will begin to help us get clear about what is actually at stake in the debate. I will then start to unpack Dreyfus's summary (quoted above), briefly characterizing the problems that exist for both philosophers in the debate. In doing so I will also outline the nature of the reconciliation that I propose. Finally I will give an overview of the dissertation as a whole.

## **II. Unwitting allies: underlying commitments in the debate**

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<sup>11</sup> Importantly, I consider language to be critical to world disclosure in both of the very different senses used by Dreyfus and McDowell. See (2007a): 356-360 for Dreyfus's discussion of the matter, including a chart on page 357 meant to distinguish the two senses. Much more will be said on this below, particularly in Chapters Four and Five.

Since the goal of this dissertation is to take up Dreyfus's challenge and extend the productivity of the debate, it makes sense to begin with an overview of key similarities brought out in the debate. It is revealing that McDowell's initial response to Dreyfus's attack is to largely agree with his criticisms when redirected toward much of contemporary mainstream philosophy.<sup>12</sup> Despite their disparate backgrounds, they are in fact responding to similar features in the contemporary philosophical landscape and do so in broadly similar ways. Nevertheless, the devil is in the details, and it is those details that fuel the debate. Acknowledging the broad areas of overlap will not only serve to highlight the contentious details, it will also lay the foundation for the later reconciliation of their positions that I will work out. Toward this end then, I will first make good on the claim that Dreyfus and McDowell share similar goals and commitments vis-à-vis the tradition.

Dreyfus and McDowell are both explicitly interested in overturning certain aspects of the philosophical tradition, perhaps most significantly its myopic emphasis on context-independent rationality. In his major work *Mind and World* McDowell offers a Wittgensteinian diagnosis "of some characteristic anxieties of modern philosophy . . . on the relation between mind and world." Specifically, he examines the tension created by two widely held commitments. First is our commitment to empiricism, whereby our judgments are accountable to the tribunal of experience. Second is our commitment to the *sui generis* nature of what Sellars called the logical space of reason—that is, the normative space wherein our claims can be justified. These two commitments have made it difficult to see how experience of the world (when conceived as taking place outside the realm of normativity) can ever serve as a tribunal, as something that can justify our normative

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<sup>12</sup> His final word is to argue that Dreyfus's claims are orthogonal to his own; see (2013).

claims. Refusing to dismiss the plausibility of either commitment by collapsing norms into nature or nature into norms, and keen on avoiding a new dualism, McDowell's manner of relieving the tension is to expose as mere illusion the anxieties stemming from these commitments, opening up a way for us to move beyond them.<sup>13</sup> His goal "is to see how we need not seem obliged to set about *answering* the questions that express the anxieties;" rather, we ought to achieve "a way of seeing things in which there is after all no tension there."<sup>14</sup>

To do so, McDowell offers us a picture of human experience that is saturated with conceptuality. Our conceptual capacities are "operative" in perceptual experience, so that experience is always already conceptually articulate—a position that accounts for the thoroughly normative nature of experience. Central to this is his attempt to convince the tradition to abandon the growing dualism of norm and nature by acknowledging that "second nature," or the capacities we acquire through socialization and initiation into a linguistic community (and hence the development of our conceptual capacities), count as genuine nature.<sup>15</sup> That is, McDowell aims at a neo-Kantian reenchantment of the world via the (ofttimes passive) operation of our rational (conceptual) capacities in perceptual experience. Thus McDowell attempts to overturn the tradition by placing norms on an equal footing with the non-normative features of the world, placing both within the province of nature, and in doing so achieve an epistemology that makes our judgments accountable to the world without the Myth of the Given.

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<sup>13</sup> (1994a): *xi*.

<sup>14</sup> (1994a): *xx-xxi*.

<sup>15</sup> See especially (1994a): Lecture IV.

Dreyfus's main criticism of McDowell is that in his attempt to overturn the tradition he simply doesn't go far enough. That is, McDowell, seduced by the thoroughly traditional view of our being essentially rational animals, fails to recognize that the normative articulation of the world comes not from the operation of our conceptual capacities in perception (and hence experience) of the world, but on account of our (non-mental) ability to cope with the world physically and skillfully. Dreyfus offers a phenomenological account of human experience that gives preeminence to the practical and passionate side of human experience in the world, making it both prior to and necessary for our ability to make judgments about the world. Thus Dreyfus agrees that experience is pervasively normative, but rather than account for this fact by claiming experience to be saturated with conceptuality, he claims that our most basic and pervasive grasp on the world—the grasp we must maintain in order to even have a world in view—is skillful and nonconceptual.<sup>16</sup>

This stark contrast—with Dreyfus insisting that our skillful coping is the primary means whereby the world is meaningfully articulated<sup>17</sup> and McDowell maintaining instead that it is the involvement of capacities that allow us to make judgments—is manifest at every stage of the debate. But equally manifest is their mutual criticism of a tradition committed to an account of rationality as primarily situation-independent and pervasive in human experience. I do not mean to overstate their similarity, nor gloss over the important differences involved in their mutual critique of mainstream views of rationality.

Nonetheless, McDowell and Dreyfus substantially agree on three fundamental features of

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<sup>16</sup> See the conclusion to (2007b) for a summary statement.

<sup>17</sup> It is important for Dreyfus that the world is normatively articulated in a structural sense via our skillful coping *before* it can be articulated in a linguistic sense. I will distinguish the two by explicitly referring to *linguistic* articulation when referring to the way in which the world is or can be linguistically expressed. This distinction is critical to understanding Dreyfus's position; see (1991): 208-224 for a detailed discussion of how the two relate.

human experience: our unmediated openness to the world, the primary importance of *phronesis* as a mode of human engagement, and an account of human intelligence that includes what I will call a feedback loop between agent<sup>18</sup> and world.

Both philosophers are committed to a form of perceptual naïve realism that posits a direct openness to the world. Dreyfus worries in the debate that in claiming human experience to be conceptually saturated, McDowell cannot consistently maintain this kind of unproblematic openness to the world.<sup>19</sup> McDowell believes, however, that such a worry assumes the dualism of reason and nature that plagues recent philosophy. Rather than serving as an intermediary between us and the world, the conceptuality imparted to us as second nature via language and culture is an intimate part of our openness to and reception of the world. As he states, language and culture are “constitutive of our unproblematic openness to the world.” Responding to a similar charge elsewhere McDowell claims, “We can take it that spontaneity is rationally vulnerable to receptivity without the unwelcome effect that receptivity seems to get in the way between us and the world, if we reject the framework that is the real source of the problems of traditional empiricism, namely, the dualism of reason and nature.”<sup>20</sup> Regardless of how successfully McDowell argues for this position, it is clear that he rejects the notion that in experience something stands between us and the world itself.

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<sup>18</sup> I use the term ‘agent’ neutrally with respect to whether an agent *qua* agent must act with a degree of self-awareness as McDowell claims or if, when optimally engaged, an agent’s self-awareness is absent as Dreyfus claims. See Dreyfus (2007b): 373-376.

<sup>19</sup> Dreyfus first raises this worry in Section III of (2005).

<sup>20</sup> (1994a): 155.

Similarly, Dreyfus argues along with Heidegger that once we fall into a Cartesian paradigm and epistemologically<sup>21</sup> separate subjects and worlds, we can never get them back together again.<sup>22</sup> More importantly, Dreyfus claims that any such separation, including any position that would separate agents from engaging directly with the world (e.g., by positing experience as representationally mediated), runs afoul of an accurate phenomenology of human experience. First, we simply do not represent the world in our basic engagements with the world, nor do we respond to features of the world that can be captured in propositional representation. Rather, we respond directly to the affordances of an environment, motivated by the tensions we feel to get a more “optimal grip” on the situation.<sup>23</sup> According to Dreyfus one does *not* adjust one’s position in a game of tennis because one sees (even implicitly) *that* doing so will allow one to better hit the ball (at least, one does not do so when playing well); rather, one feels an inherent tension, one is physically drawn into a different position that allows a better shot at the ball. Developing this sort of sensitive attunement to situations and possibilities for action is what skill development entails.<sup>24</sup> So in the first place, claiming either that representations serve as an intermediary between agent and world, or even that agents when absorbed in skillful action respond to definite, representable features (rather than to whole situations and the tensions within and possibilities afforded by those situations) is simply mischaracterizing

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<sup>21</sup> Just as important to Dreyfus (and Heidegger) is the ontological separation inherent in the Cartesian paradigm of subject and object. My present purpose, however, is to discuss the overlap of their criticism with that of McDowell. As noted, both eschew an epistemological mediation between humans and their perceptual environment.

<sup>22</sup> See Dreyfus’s discussion in (1991): 46-54.

<sup>23</sup> See (1991): 61-83.

<sup>24</sup> See Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus (1988): 16-51.

human experience—getting the phenomena wrong.<sup>25</sup> Second, as is prominently on display in all of Dreyfus’s characterizations of human action, representing one’s experience, whether reflecting on it or attempting to articulate it, inevitably degrades one’s expertise.<sup>26</sup> Finally, Dreyfus has spent much of his career criticizing artificial intelligence programs for trying to create robots that represent their environment (which inevitably gave rise to the intractable frame problem<sup>27</sup>). His position here is perhaps best captured by his slogan, “The best representation of the world is the world itself.”<sup>28</sup>

For both McDowell and Dreyfus embodiment is a critical component of our openness to the world. Both acknowledge that experience of the world requires embodied and contextually embedded skillful engagement. Hence for McDowell, “If we begin with a free-standing notion of an experiential route through objective reality, a temporally extended point of view that might be bodiless so far as the connection between subjectivity and objectivity goes, there seems to be no prospect of building up from there to the notion of a substantial presence in the world,” and any such picture “is quite unsatisfying.” Rather, we should recognize that what we are as humans is “a bodily presence in the world.”<sup>29</sup> And this is exactly the sort of picture that Dreyfus’s phenomenology reveals—one in which

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<sup>25</sup> Dreyfus is fond of saying things like “the job of the phenomenologist is to get clear concerning the phenomena that need to be explained” (2005, 4).

<sup>26</sup> This line of reasoning plays a large role in (2007a). See (2002) for an overview of Dreyfus’s views on the stages of skill acquisition and why representation degrades expertise. Dreyfus of course allows for the importance of observation, self-monitoring, or reflecting on and responding to rules in action in certain situations, such as when one is first developing a skill. His claim is that once a skill has been developed beyond mere competence, however, reflective activities then degrade performance.

<sup>27</sup> See for example (1972), (1988), (1992), and (2007c). For more on the frame problem, see Ford and Pylyshyn (1996).

<sup>28</sup> See particularly (2002). Dreyfus credits the actual articulation of this slogan to MIT professor Rodney Brooks, but also claims that Brooks was regurgitating Dreyfus’s original critique; see (2007c): 249-250, fn 17-18.

<sup>29</sup> (1994a): 102-104.

what we *are* is bodies that are directly attuned to the demands of the situations in which we are always already engaged.<sup>30</sup> Dreyfus notes this similarity between McDowell's epistemology and the claims of existential phenomenologists at the start of his 2005 APA Presidential Address but then claims that the similarity is specious, belied by McDowell's commitment to conceptuality. Nevertheless, as becomes more and more evident during the course of the debate, McDowell shares Dreyfus's concern that we recognize the centrality of our skillful embodiment and eschew the "myth of the disembodied intellect."<sup>31</sup>

This shared commitment to the importance of our situated embodiment leads to a second important point of common ground. While a good deal of energy is exerted in clearing up various mis-readings, one clear outcome of the debate is McDowell's and Dreyfus's shared commitment to the importance of *phronesis*.<sup>32</sup> While they remain at odds concerning the pervasiveness of conceptuality in situation-specific activities, both acknowledge that the content of our engaged experience is not fully specifiable in detachment from the situation. That is, both "reject the idea that the content of practical wisdom . . . can be captured in general prescriptions for conduct, determinately expressible

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<sup>30</sup> While McDowell acknowledges the importance of this point, it plays a small role in his philosophy and he spends little time helping the reader to see *why* it is important. In contrast, these claims and their justification permeate Dreyfus's work. See the start of (2005) for an overview of Dreyfus's claims on this point.

<sup>31</sup> Part of this shared commitment might well come from a shared commitment to getting the phenomenology right; that is, both are committed to the irreducible importance of accurately characterizing lived experience. Dreyfus's concern here is quite explicit. Erik Rietveld claims that McDowell's commitment, though not as apparent, is just as real, stemming from the influence of Wittgenstein; see (2010).

<sup>32</sup> It also comes out in the debate that both are heavily influenced by Heidegger's reading of Aristotle on *phronesis*. For McDowell, this influence is mediated by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Charles Taylor. See McDowell (2007a): 340, and Dreyfus (2007a): 353.

independently of the concrete situations in which the *phronimos* is called on to act.”<sup>33</sup> They agree instead that *phronesis* involves “a kind of understanding that makes possible an immediate response to the full concrete situation.”<sup>34</sup> Both reject the idea that our being rational means that the intelligibility of specific situations can be independently, propositionally specifiable. For this reason, *phronesis* requires “situation-specific discernment.”<sup>35</sup> More particularly, both claim that in much of our experience we skillfully engage with the world without ever linguistically articulating those experiences. This is in part because at least some of what we experience is *not* conceptual in the sense that we already have a determinate grasp on that aspect of experience. That is, we do not already possess mastery over language that would correctly express the experience, and for at least some of our experiences, we never do.

The important difference between the two here concerns whether or not the content of experience is, in the experience itself, in a form such that it could *in principle* be linguistically expressed. For Dreyfus, the fully immersed nature of our situatedness and the immediacy of our skillful involvement in that situation leaves no room for anything recognizably minded at play in the situation. Instead, any attempt to linguistically express the contents of that situation will either distort the true nature of the experience or will remain necessarily inadequate.<sup>36</sup> For McDowell on the other hand, the inadequacy of situation-independent rationality to specify what takes place in *phronesis* means not that our particular, skillful involvements are devoid of mindedness, but rather that we ought to

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<sup>33</sup> (2007a): 340. Dreyfus responds, “I’m happy to hear that McDowell and I agree in our reading of Aristotle on *phronesis* as a case of situation-specific skillful coping (2007a, 353).”

<sup>34</sup> (2005): 5.

<sup>35</sup> McDowell (2007a): 340.

<sup>36</sup> This is a pervasive theme in Dreyfus’s writing. For a recent articulation, see Dreyfus and Kelly, (2007).

reject any notion of rationality that will not allow it to operate situation-dependently.<sup>37</sup> What makes a situation conceptual is not that the content of all experience is already appropriate to our conceptual repertoire, but that “*all* its content is present in a *form* in which . . . it is suitable to constitute the contents of conceptual capacities. All that would be needed . . . is for it to be focused on and made to be the meaning of a linguistic expression.”<sup>38</sup> The distinction between their positions then, has not to do with the unreflective and fully immersed nature of certain key experiences, but whether such experiences are in principle appropriate to linguistic expression.

Their convergence on *phronesis* highlights a related similarity between the two that is never made explicit in the course of their debate—namely, their agreement on the inadequacy of traditional philosophy to characterize what takes place in lived experience. Both reject the idea that when describing human behavior the possibilities are exhausted by an action’s either being the result of meaningless causality or under the direction of explicit reflection. Both philosophers are trying to work out a third alternative at play in *phronesis* that lies between causality and reflective reasoning. McDowell labels his alternative “engaged intellect,”<sup>39</sup> while Dreyfus follows Maurice Merleau-Ponty in calling his alternative either “motivation” or “motor intentionality.”<sup>40</sup> Dreyfus is keen to make

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<sup>37</sup> (2007a): 339-342.

<sup>38</sup> (2007a): 347-348.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Engaged Intellect’ is the title of a recent collection of McDowell’s essays, which includes part of his side of the debate with Dreyfus.

<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that while Merleau-Ponty spends a great deal of time describing the phenomenon picked out by these terms, and while he can be said to have coined both terms in order to refer to this phenomenon, he rarely uses them. In his seminal work *Phenomenology of Perception* he uses ‘motivation’ on three occasions (see 57fn, 301-302, and 505) and only once refers to “motility as basic intentionality” (158-159). In addition to the debate, Dreyfus’s most detailed explication of the phenomenon can be found in (2002). See also Wrathall (2007).

clear that despite their similar motivation and approach to the tradition, there remain significant differences between an engaged intellect and motor intentionality. For Dreyfus the key distinction lies in McDowell's positing of a ubiquitous "I do" in all meaningful human action; in contradistinction Dreyfus maintains that, à la Merleau-Ponty, absorbed coping is utterly devoid of a subjective ego and thus cannot be captured by an "I do." (It is conspicuous, however, that when Merleau-Ponty claims that we ought "to understand motility as basic intentionality," he expounds this claim by noting that "Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'." On the face of it then, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology seems not to be a wedge between McDowell and Dreyfus's respective "third way" alternatives, but rather a potential bridge. Much more needs to be said on this potential area of overlap, and we will return to it below.)

Finally, Dreyfus and McDowell share the criticism of traditional philosophy that it fails to adequately account for the fact that human intelligibility—or the way in which the world is intelligibly disclosed to us—is constituted in part by a continually updated feedback loop or what Dreyfus (again, following Merleau-Ponty) calls an "intentional arc." Specifically, "as the agent acquires skills, those skills are 'stored,' not as representations in the mind, but as dispositions to respond to the solicitations of situations in the world," so that as "our skills are acquired by dealing with things and situations . . . in turn they determine how things and situations show up for us as requiring our responses."<sup>41</sup> Hence

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<sup>41</sup> (2002): 367-368. In (2005) he defines an intentional arc as "the way our successful coping continually enriches the way things in the world show up" (3), and claims that the inability to program an intentional arc is one of the main challenges facing artificial intelligence. Introducing the term, Merleau-Ponty claims "that the life of consciousness—cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life—is subtended by an 'intentional arc' which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological

for Dreyfus it is not the case that in experience we are handed a bare given on the basis of which we then make inferences, or overlay with certain meanings, or which we can then take up in different ways according to our skillful comportment. Rather, that which is given by the world is always a *meaningful* given, meaningful in terms of our past experiences. Our past skillful involvement is sedimented in present disclosure.<sup>42</sup>

As has often been the case in this comparison between the two, Dreyfus remains focused on the skillful nature of human engagement with the world while McDowell focuses on the implications of our rationality; this is also true with regard to the perceptual-epistemic feedback loop involved in how the world is made intelligible. While Dreyfus sees our past skillful involvement with things and situations as in part determining the way in which things and situations show up now, McDowell's whole point in *Mind and World* is to argue that our maturation from infants into adults is a process whereby our experience of the world is continually altered and updated precisely to the extent that we conceptually develop. Just as it is for Dreyfus, this change in how things show up is both qualitatively real and pervasive. The whole thrust of *Mind and World* is to argue that in experience we are handed a *meaningful* given, one that avoids the epistemological Myth of the Given because it is through and through conceptual,<sup>43</sup> and yet one that is nevertheless natural. As McDowell puts it, "Our nature is largely second nature, and our second nature is the way it is not just because of the potentialities we were born with, but also because of

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and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects" (1958, 157).

<sup>42</sup> (2005): 11-12.

<sup>43</sup> In one summary statement McDowell says "The position I am urging appeals to receptivity [i.e., a given] to ensure friction, like the Myth of the Given, but it is unlike the Myth of the Given in that it takes capacities of spontaneity to be in play all the way out to the ultimate grounds of empirical judgment" (1994a, 67).

our upbringing, our *Bildung*.”<sup>44</sup> Thus for both philosophers, at least in the process of maturation, human intelligibility and the way that it allows us to have a meaningful world is something that is (or at least can be) updated or reconstituted in terms of our initiation into social practices. This fact will again play an important role later on.

While it is clear that in approach and emphasis McDowell and Dreyfus remain divided, these divisions rest on the back of a substantive agreement vis-à-vis the shortcomings of the tradition. Both philosophers are intent on overturning various pillars of the philosophical tradition by working out an alternative to the traditional picture of human experience as exhausted by mere causal interaction and a notion of rationality that accounts only for situation-independent features of the world. Instead both philosophers posit a form of naïve realism that entails human experience as unavoidably immersed in particular situations; both elevate the importance of *phronesis* as a crucial mode of human understanding and action, necessitating an understanding of *phronesis* that avoids the tradition’s inadequate cause versus reflective action dualism; and both allow for our epistemic relationship with the natural world to be susceptible to reconstitution as we mature.<sup>45</sup>

### **III. A diagnosis and prescription**

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<sup>44</sup> (1994a): 87. McDowell is silent concerning whether the acquisition of (conceptual) second nature is ongoing in an analogous sense to Dreyfus’s intentional arc; I will argue in Chapters Four and Five that it is.

<sup>45</sup> There are of course other points of convergence between the two, some of which will be discussed later. This broad characterization of their mutual opposition to much of the philosophical tradition is meant to orient us with respect to the debate and the reconciliation I will propose.

As noted above, there are several places in the debate where Dreyfus alludes to the main challenge facing existential phenomenologists today (and philosophers generally). In the wake of a careful phenomenology of human experience—one that gives pride of place to social practices and our particular, situated mode of embodiment, and so undermines widely-held intellectualist assumptions in the philosophical tradition—Dreyfus asks: “Granted that, when we are transparently responding to affordances, we do not encounter *context-independent objects* with reidentifiable *properties* about which we can then make judgments, how can our transparent coping with affordances become explicit coping with objects?” He endorses Samuel Todes’s claim that “how conceptual content arises from nonconceptual content [is] the central puzzle bequeathed to philosophers by Kant.”<sup>46</sup>

Put starkly, Dreyfus’s phenomenology of human experience leads him to maintain two fundamental commitments, and he sees the primary philosophical puzzle today as one of reconciling these two commitments. First, he maintains what I will call his

Nonconceptual Coping Thesis:

“The phenomena show that embodied skills, when we are fully absorbed in enacting them, have a kind of non-mental content that is non-conceptual, non-propositional, non-rational . . . and non-linguistic.” As humans we are primarily and for the most part open to and interact with a world that is made up of “the totality of interconnected [and nonconceptual] solicitations that attract or repulse us.”<sup>47</sup>

Dreyfus offers three main reasons for holding the Nonconceptual Coping Thesis. First and foremost, he claims that this is what careful phenomenological description of lived

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<sup>46</sup> (2005): 18 and 17 respectively.

<sup>47</sup> (2007a): 360 and 357 respectively.

experience reveals. Even when engaged in practices that involve detached reflection, our bodies maintain a pervasive, practical and normative grip on the world that does not involve the discrimination of determinate features or facts and does not contain (even implicitly) any self-awareness. For example, an explicitly reflective philosophical debate on conceptuality between interlocutors riding a light rail requires constant adjustments in order to maintain both balance and adherence to normative rules like distance-standing practices; any explicitly reflective activity is going to take place within an embodied situation that will likewise require “mindless” coping. The point of such careful phenomenological description is to provide philosophers with the actual phenomena to which our philosophy must remain accountable—which is why Dreyfus so adamantly emphasizes his commitment to this thesis. In addition, Dreyfus argues that the Nonconceptual Coping Thesis provides us with an account of how it is that in reflection we always experience the world as already meaningful. The world is normatively articulate (i.e., meaningfully structured) for us (at least in part) on account of our practical, skillful engagement with things in the course of our making our way about the world, and this is a feat that does not in itself require reflective thought.<sup>48</sup> Finally, the Nonconceptual Coping Thesis accounts for why it is that expertise is degraded when we explicitly monitor or reflect on our skillful performances.<sup>49</sup>

Second, Dreyfus maintains the much more quotidian commitment that I will call the Detachment Thesis:

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<sup>48</sup> See (1991) Chapters 10-11.

<sup>49</sup> These three points are all part of his criticism of AI mentioned above. According to Dreyfus, classical AI is something of an experimental program based on a bad theory of mind and what it is that we humans do. Its failure to simulate human intelligence by programming robots to represent and respond to context-independent features is a fourth reason for Dreyfus’s support of his Nonconceptual Coping Thesis.

Humans have the ability to engage in conceptual practices, including linguistically articulating and reflecting on a world of separable, context-independent facts and features.

While Dreyfus often acknowledges this commitment—mostly in the context of discussing its relation to the Nonconceptual Coping Thesis—he spends little time elaborating it. His emphasis is rather to bring to light the reality and importance of nonconceptual coping, arguing that it gets covered over by the tradition’s inordinate focus on our reflective capacities and experiences.

Thus Dreyfus maintains a basic dichotomy in human experience between the nonconceptual, “ground floor” or “background” practices and the “top story” or “foreground” conceptual practices that they support. Maintaining these two commitments gives rise to a new form of mind-body dualism—a dualism in the realm of human understanding and intelligibility. To understand this dualism, it’s important to note that Dreyfus is not merely noting the difference between subpersonal information processing and personal level awareness.<sup>50</sup> Rather, humans have an embodied, practical *understanding* of the world around them that is different in *kind* from the understanding manifested in reflection on or linguistic articulation of the world—characterized primarily in terms of conditions of improvement versus conditions of truth.<sup>51</sup> For Dreyfus although our reflective understanding is derivative of our practical understanding, both are personal-level forms of understanding. This is part of why his inability to work out an account of their relation is so problematic.

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<sup>50</sup> As we shall see in the next chapter, part of the debate over nonconceptual content concerns such subpersonal content.

<sup>51</sup> See (1999).

Dreyfus wants to *resolve* this tension. That is, he wants to find an existential pineal gland capable of philosophically accounting for how the content of our embodied experience of the world—according to Dreyfus, characterized in part by its being inappropriate to linguistic articulation—gets (at least partially) transformed into the content of reflective understanding—characterized by its being appropriate to linguistic articulation.<sup>52</sup> Again, it's important to Dreyfus's account that our most basic, skillful grasp on the world is a matter of dealing with a reflectively undifferentiated world that cannot, even in principle, be captured linguistically; this is because the content of such experience does not contain the determinate features appropriate to concepts. To make the same point in other terms, while McDowell claims that rationality is operative at the level of the constitution of experience, Dreyfus claims that rationality is operative post-experience, at the level of transforming experience into a content suitable for reflection and linguistic expression—or at least that such is true of a significant proportion of human experience.<sup>53</sup>

As we will see, these competing claims continue to separate Dreyfus and McDowell, even after McDowell explicitly disavows his earlier claims crediting experience with specifically *propositional* content or the sort of content had by judgments. Through most of the debate, McDowell more or less maintains his “demanding” sense of rationality

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<sup>52</sup> While there is a debate over whether the arrow of primacy ought to run from thought to linguistic practice or the other way around, both sides of this debate acknowledge the adequacy of the one to express the content of the other. See Fodor and Lepore (2007) and Brandom (2007). For the purposes of our present discussion, then, it doesn't matter if Dreyfus's *resolution* transformed our pragmatic understanding into thought or into linguistic expression. Given McDowell's criterial link between conceptuality and discourse, I will likewise focus on the connection between pragmatic understanding and linguistic expression.

<sup>53</sup> As I will note in the next chapter, there is some ambiguity here. It might be more accurate to say that Dreyfus recognizes our ability to rationally access the world in certain states or attitudes; nevertheless, such states or attitudes remain derivative of our initial, non-rational experience.

articulated in *Mind and World* whereby in order for a content to be conceptual it is necessarily and self-consciously expressible in propositional terms.<sup>54</sup> More recently, however, McDowell rejected this stance:

I used to assume that to conceive experiences as actualizations of conceptual capacities, we would need to credit experiences with *propositional* content, the sort of content judgments have. And I used to assume that the content of an experience would need to include *everything* the experience enables its subject to know noninferentially. But both these assumptions now strike me as wrong.<sup>55</sup>

In other words, McDowell's position shifts, making raw experience a pre-propositional, pre-articulated, categorially unified content (i.e., a Kantian intuition as he understands it). Nonetheless, it remains the case that this content is already appropriate to linguistic or reflective "carving out." Dreyfus, on the other hand, claims both that a fundamental transformation occurs in making a bit of pre-articulated content into the content of an expression and also that not all of experience can be so articulated. Consequently, Dreyfus sets philosophy the task of determining how this transformation takes place—how we go from a nonconceptual to a conceptual content in experience.

While Dreyfus is bent on *resolving* the tension arising out of his Nonconceptual Coping and Detachment Theses, McDowell attempts to *dissolve* the tension by claiming that our embodied practices are already permeated with the same human conceptuality at play in propositional articulation and rationality. This route, in addition to avoiding the tension

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<sup>54</sup> See (1994a): 46-47, especially fn 1.

<sup>55</sup> (2008a): 3. Much more will be said about this important shift and McDowell's current position in Chapter Three.

Dreyfus is left with, has two significant epistemological benefits. First, McDowell garners the transcendental payoff of being able to establish how it is that our descriptions of the world are capable of being *about* the world. Second, this position has the epistemological payoff of accounting for how our experience of the world is able to serve as a tribunal, passing judgment on our thoughts and assertions about the world.<sup>56</sup> While the purpose of this dissertation is not to evaluate the success of McDowell's epistemology, it is an insightful and cogent work that potentially dovetails well with the insights of existential phenomenology. What is more, I agree with McDowell that our being linguistic animals holistically changes the nature of human intelligibility and experience. Consequently, I will argue that there ought not be a fundamental divide between coping and linguistic articulation of the sort that Dreyfus posits. Language operates in both context-dependent and context-independent ways. Rather than viewing language as parasitic on coping skills (as Dreyfus does), I will argue that language is among the most basic ways in which we skillfully discriminate and cope with the world, that it is just as fundamental to establishing the "background" of mature human experience as other skillful human capacities. (As I will argue below, this is not to say that there might not be a chronological or evolutionary priority to Dreyfus's non-linguistic, non-mental skillful coping. Nonetheless, as Dreyfus is fond of analogizing, once the scaffolding is no longer needed, there's no reason to claim we're still using it; likewise, I see no reason to award a continued priority to a wholly non-linguistic form of coping in mature adults; rather, I believe the evidence points the other way.)

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<sup>56</sup> As mentioned above, establishing our experience to be conceptual "all the way out" and thereby garnering these philosophical payoffs is the central focus of *Mind and World*. See also (2009).

To this point, I am in substantial agreement with McDowell's account. Not only do I think McDowell's conceptual holism—his claim that possessing conceptual capacities effects a sea change in the kind of content had in human experience—is right, I do not believe (as Dreyfus does) that this claim significantly contradicts the insights of existential phenomenology. Nonetheless, I believe that Dreyfus is right to be dissatisfied with McDowell's response because of its failure to account for the richness of our embodied coping and its absorbed, "pre-linguistic" content. That is, I agree with Dreyfus that we ought not shortchange the phenomenon of unreflective embodied coping. Simply dissolving the tension the way that McDowell does merely elides the phenomenological insights concerning the rich and fully normative nature of our practical understanding of the world. What's more, I shall argue, doing so is simply unnecessary. Dreyfus is correct that the content of experience is not fully susceptible to propositional articulation since important aspects of that experience are (fundamentally and not just in the experience itself) non-propositional. Also, while not antagonistic to McDowell's position, I will claim that language and the ways in which it hooks onto and is a part of our skillful experience of the world is much more complex than McDowell's account acknowledges. Making this clear highlights the ways in which McDowell's account can accommodate Dreyfus's phenomenological insights. Finally, I think Dreyfus is right to demand of McDowell "an argument for the move from the reasonable claim that attentive experience" and the conceptual capacities exercised therein are "*sometimes exercised* to the claim that" these capacities are "*always operative*."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> (2007b): 376.

While I don't want to *simply* dissolve the tension à la McDowell, I'm convinced that Dreyfus's new mind-body dualism is similar to Descartes's dualism in the sense that holding out for a satisfying *resolution* is an ultimately fruitless endeavor. More importantly, I find this dualistic account phenomenologically inadequate.<sup>58</sup> While Dreyfus gives a richer, more complete description of human experience and various problems inherent within the tradition, I believe that McDowell's overall approach offers a much more promising path. Consequently, I propose to *redeem* Dreyfus's commitments by reinterpreting what is genuinely at stake in each of them and by showing that the resulting tension is due to a misguided presupposition: Dreyfus incorrectly assumes that the content of human language (and consequently linguistic practice generally) is fundamentally propositional in nature. This presupposition keeps Dreyfus from recognizing that like our other skillful bodily capacities, language helps us to discriminate aspects of and cope with the world, since doing so would seem to necessarily imply that all meaningful human experience is propositional. Recognizing that there is more to language than what can be exhausted by its propositionality, and also recognizing linguistic practice as being just as important as other skillful practices to the phenomenon of world disclosure eliminates the difficulties involved in Dreyfus's dualism. It means that there *simply is no transition* from a pre-linguistic/pre-reflective *kind of* content to a linguistic/reflective one; rather, there is only taking up of the same holistically constituted content in different ways.

During the course of their debate Dreyfus's presupposition colludes with a similar presupposition held by McDowell in order to keep the two apart—namely, that experience is exhaustively propositional and appropriate to propositional articulation. As noted above,

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<sup>58</sup> Given the stock Dreyfus's places in getting the phenomenology right, this second point is the more significant of the two.

in subsequent work McDowell abandons the first half of this presupposition; I will argue that he ought to abandon the second half as well. Not only are these presuppositions an important part of the root cause of Dreyfus's and McDowell's conflict, but their roles are philosophically superfluous to both philosophers' positions. Consequently, repudiating their respective presuppositions will allow us both to redeem the core of Dreyfus's phenomenological commitments and also show them to be amenable to McDowell's conceptualist position and its epistemological benefits.

Ultimately, I will seek to do this by arguing that the content of our absorbed coping practices and the content of our linguistic practices are integrated in a way that is analogous to the way in which our perceptual modalities are integrated in perception. This holistic integration enriches both coping and linguistic practices and helps to constitute the domain of human intelligibility. This means that the content of experience is a unified phenomenon, intelligible in terms of the integrated ways in which we skillfully relate to the world. In other words, I will argue that the meaningfulness of human experience is holistically constituted by the mutual integration and enrichment of each of our skillful bodily capacities, including language. The result of this claim is twofold: first, meaningful human experience is indeed always (at least in principle) fodder for linguistic *practice* (though not for propositional articulation); and second, not only does linguistic *content* contain more than merely propositional content, but linguistic practice also relates to the content of experience by doing more than merely expressing the content of that experience.

#### **IV. Overview of chapters**

A significant amount of groundwork still needs to be laid before I can make this positive argument, however. Having briefly identified the overarching similarities between McDowell and Dreyfus, Chapter Two will further sketch the philosophical topography involved by first summarizing and then situating Dreyfus within the greater philosophical debate over nonconceptuality—a conspicuous gap in the debate itself. Specifically, I will briefly examine the notions of ‘nonconceptuality’ and ‘content’—critical to (though largely ignored within) the Dreyfus-McDowell debate—mapping out the various positions one might take up, and making Dreyfus’s commitments concerning nonconceptuality more explicit.

I will then move to criticize Dreyfus’s position. To begin, I will try to state more clearly what Dreyfus’s Nonconceptual Coping Thesis amounts to and why it is in conflict with his second (unproblematic) Detachment Thesis (or, at least, why it demands an explanation of how the two are compatible, which no one to this point has done). Next, I will argue that the nature of the conflict between Dreyfus’s two commitments turns on his presupposition that linguistic content is exhaustively propositional in nature. This presupposition is problematic for Dreyfus in part because it reveals an internal inconsistency in his thinking about language, which stems from the inadequacy of his phenomenological examination of language—an inadequacy that plagues other contemporary phenomenologists and for similar reasons. I claim that this inconsistency and inadequacy with regard to language is due in part to the way in which Dreyfus’s account of language has been dominated by his agenda for criticizing the tradition. His debate with McDowell is one of several prominent examples. The inadequacy of his standard critique when aimed at McDowell in the debate highlights the fact that Dreyfus’s

own goals would be better served were he more consistent in emphasizing what he has elsewhere proclaimed: that phenomenology reveals important and thoroughly non-propositional aspects of language. What is ultimately at stake in Dreyfus's Nonconceptual Coping Thesis is not in principle lost if one accepts the linguistic articulability of our embodied coping practices. Later we will see that the same can be said of one's accepting a certain kind of conceptualism.

An important part of Chapter Three consists in updating McDowell's account in the debate to accommodate important changes he has subsequently articulated—particularly McDowell's explicit disavowal of his former claim (at play early on in the debate) that experience is fully amenable to propositional articulation. Just as significantly, however, McDowell maintains his conceptualism. This updated position has a particular significance vis-à-vis the debate that is never discussed in the debate. Sorting this out is a necessary precursor to the next goal of Chapter Three: evaluating McDowell's position. I begin by evaluating McDowell's conceptualism in light of representative criticisms from the general debate over nonconceptual content. Specifically, I evaluate the strength of criticisms lodged against McDowell's conceptualism based on both concept possession and composition conditions. Next, I evaluate McDowell's conceptualism in light of Dreyfus's criticism. In each case I argue that McDowell's position, particularly given his shift to non-propositionalism, stands up to these attacks. While he now recognizes that his conceptualist account does not require experience to be propositional, however, it is not clear that he fully realizes the implications and possibilities that this shift entails. Once we allow both experience and conceptuality to come apart from propositionality, and instead link conceptuality to language, we begin to see ways in which language can non-propositionally articulate

experience, without giving up either the claim that acquiring language effects a sea change in human perception and experience or the claim that all experience is in principle available to expression. Nevertheless, McDowell retains a stronger allegiance to propositionalism than his position requires—an allegiance that, as Dreyfus would say, distorts the phenomena. I end the chapter with a review of Chapters Two and Three and a sketch of the potential resolution that these chapters make possible.

Chapter Four is where I begin to make good on my promise of a positive resolution to the overall debate. I begin with a review of the dualism inherent in Dreyfus's position and why I find it problematic. I then examine and reject Dreyfus's proposed solution—a gradualism in perspectival change that moves us from nonconceptual coping to fully conceptual reflecting. This sets up my proposed alternative: that we recognize the integrated nature of our conceptual capacities and skillful dispositions, operative in perception and jointly structuring a domain of human intelligibility. Dreyfus is correct that the world is primarily intelligible in terms of our ability to skillfully cope with things, but he fails to recognize that language is one of our basic means of coping, and hence one of the skillful dispositions involved in constituting the nature of human intelligibility. I support this claim by arguing that Dreyfus's examples of nonconceptual, motor-intentional activity all manifest conceptualism in their amenability to language and the way in which coping is responsive to rational discourse. Here I follow Dreyfus's lead in bringing to bear the tools of phenomenology in order to show that language is a means to reinforce and not merely step back from our skillful coping. Critically, I highlight experiences where the speech acts in question are dependent on their semantic content in order to reinforce coping. I likewise highlight the fact that Dreyfus's hallmarks of skillful coping are pervasively operative in our

explicitly conceptual, linguistic activities. These arguments are meant to show that careful phenomenology reveals McDowellian conceptualism as supporting rather than running afoul of the core of Dreyfus's position.

Chapter Five further argues for the theses set out in Chapter Four, that conceptual capacities are just as necessary for and pervasive in meaningful human perception as are skillful coping practices, and that motor-intentional activities are properly characterized as conceptual. In order to clarify this claim, I once again make use of Dreyfusian phenomenology in order to try to state precisely what it means for our conceptual capacities to be at work in even unreflective activities or perceptions. I then provide arguments that motor-intentional normativity, and specifically our human ability to operate in a normative, teleologically structured situation requires conceptuality. All of this is to show that not only *can* conceptuality be involved in perceiving or understanding the world—an uncontentious claim in the debate—but that conceptuality (properly understood) is a fundamental part of all human perception and understanding. Finally, I use this understanding of pervasive conceptuality to account for transparent social practices—practices that Dreyfus challenges the conceptualist to account for and that McDowell dismisses as outside of the scope of relevant agential experience.

Chapter Six clarifies my arguments concerning how we ought to understand conceptual activity and the conceptual nature of skillful coping before considering potential objections. I make use of a Frisbee catching example prominent in the debate between Dreyfus and McDowell. Examining six different cases of unreflectively catching a Frisbee I use my notion of conceptuality both to understand what is going on in each scenario and also to criticize Dreyfus's and McDowell's positions as inadequate. Having clarified my

position, I address worries that critics on either side of the debate might leverage against my overall resolution to the Dreyfus-McDowell debate. This chapter then ends with a consideration of implications for future research made possible by the work of this dissertation.

In summary, I will argue herein that Dreyfus is correct to note the phenomenological absence of such things as reflection, concept deployment, or a self-conscious ego in much of our coping experiences, and that certain aspects of our experience are not amenable to propositional articulation. Just as importantly, Dreyfus is correct to note that our ability to bring the world propositionally into view—to reflect on or discuss determinate, isolable features—depends on a basic world-disclosure that functions as a disambiguating background-context. These key phenomenological insights, however, are perfectly compatible with McDowell’s recent articulation of his conceptualism. While seeing this requires a liberal interpretation of McDowell’s understanding of discursive activity, conceptuality itself is not a barrier. Rather, a careful phenomenology and analysis of language reveals it as a pervasive feature of human perception and activity—including skillful coping—and critical to the disclosure of a meaningful, human world.

## CHAPTER TWO

### EVALUATING DREYFUS VIS-À-VIS THE DEBATE OVER NONCONCEPTUALITY

Communication between consciousnesses is not based on the common meaning of their respective experiences, for it is equally the basis of that meaning.

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>59</sup>

Before analyzing and evaluating Dreyfus's and McDowell's respective positions, something more needs to be said concerning the key issue of conceptuality and how their debate fits into the larger context of the debate over nonconceptual content. Despite its centrality, neither Dreyfus nor McDowell devotes substantial attention to carefully articulating what conceptuality is or what nonconceptuality might mean. Neither reference the growing outside literature or developments. Consequently, the first goal of this chapter is to contextualize my critique by first looking at and discussing the parameters of the larger debate over nonconceptual content. As part of this I will discuss the link between conceptuality and propositionality.

Doing so will lay the groundwork for my second goal in this chapter: to situate Dreyfus within this broader framework in order to better assess exactly what his claims concerning nonconceptuality are and his reasons for and the merits of those claims. There is a significant difficulty upfront since Dreyfus denies several of the key assumptions held by many on both sides of the debate and is focused on aspects of perception and experience

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<sup>59</sup> 1958: 216.

largely absent from the debate. Mapping Dreyfus onto this debate is a significant philosophical task in itself, one that I believe is worthwhile not only in terms of assessing his debate with McDowell, but with possible dividends for the greater dialogue on nonconceptuality.

As part of this, I will look more closely at Dreyfus's commitment to the Nonconceptual Coping Thesis. I will show that Dreyfus's main targets in his debate with McDowell and in his research more generally are, first, the belief that experience can be exhaustively characterized in propositional terms; second, situation-independent characterizations of intentionality; and third, the presence of the ego in fluid coping, all of which he takes to be inseparable from the conceptualist position and the claim that language is adequate to characterize our experiences. Situating these claims within the larger debate over nonconceptual content, I will argue that Dreyfus misinterprets his own position vis-à-vis the contemporary debate. That is, Dreyfus is not a comfortable ally of the nonconceptualists.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, the main goal of this chapter is to criticize Dreyfus's conclusions. I will argue that his dualism is based on both an internal inconsistency in his own works and the phenomenological inadequacy of his view of language—a problem by no means unique to Dreyfus. While my efforts in this chapter are primarily negative, they constitute the necessary groundwork to show that a more adequate phenomenology of language not only allows Dreyfus to be more consistent, but is also a critical step in reconciling the tension

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<sup>60</sup> If I am right then instead of a nonconceptual partisan, Dreyfus's phenomenological insights are more fruitfully understood as revealing the inadequacy of the cognitive bias of the overall debate on nonconceptual content (i.e., its silence on the essentially skillful and embodied nature of human experience). While I suggest as much below, making the case goes beyond the purview of this dissertation.

between his Nonconceptual Coping and Detachment theses. The positive side of this claim will be fully worked out in subsequent chapters. Here I will make clear that the insights Dreyfus is most eager to propound are not lost if we accept the linguistic articulability of our coping practices, and consequently, Dreyfus's insights are potentially amenable to either side of the debate.

### **I. What do we mean by conceptual vs. nonconceptual content?**

While Dreyfus has spent his entire career advocating a notion of nonconceptual experience<sup>61</sup>, the contemporary debate over nonconceptual content arose out of Gareth Evans' landmark work *The Varieties of Reference* in 1982, and has been waged primarily over the last two decades.<sup>62</sup> While the topic of nonconceptual content has implications in a number of areas of philosophical and cognitive science research, I will confine my discussion to the nature of perception, since perception dominates not only the general debate over nonconceptual content, but is also a prominent feature of the debate between Dreyfus and McDowell. As we will see later, the phenomena Dreyfus is most interested in illuminating are not discussed in the contemporary literature; nevertheless, perception is

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<sup>61</sup> For example, see his extensive critique of classical artificial intelligence in the 1960s. Articulating an early form of the intractable frame problem, Dreyfus argued that the main problem with AI research at the time was its assumption that "to behave intelligently presupposes that all relevant information about the world must be expressible in an isolable, determinate way" (1967: 14). Considering his early work alongside the recent debate, it is clear that Dreyfus has consistently maintained that this sort of information processing is in fact dependent on a more basic, nonconceptual grasp of the world.

<sup>62</sup> As a historical note, Evans views on nonconceptual content were indirectly influenced by Merleau-Ponty via Charles Taylor whom he quotes and whose Merleau-Pontian views he endorses in *Varieties of Reference* (156, 227). Consequently, while Dreyfus's work advocating nonconceptual content has until recently been absent from the analytic debate arising with Evans, it appears that both find a common source in Merleau-Ponty.

important to Dreyfus and serves as something of a bridge for analyzing his claims vis-à-vis the debate.

Characterizing nonconceptual perceptions is obviously a negative enterprise (at least initially) and depends on a substantive distinction between some aspect of perception and what a conceptual content is.<sup>63</sup> Given the lack of consensus on what concepts are, it is no surprise that those involved in the debate likewise disagree on what it might mean for a perceptual experience to be nonconceptual. Recent literature is largely (though not exclusively) Fregean in its understanding of concepts and coalesces around the central claim that a perception is nonconceptual if a subject can be said to possess that perception without likewise having to possess (at least at some sufficient level of mastery) the concepts needed to specify that perception or without the perception reflecting the concepts that subject possesses.<sup>64</sup>

This generic definition is ambiguous, however, concerning whether a given perception is nonconceptual on account of its having a different kind of *content* than conceptual states ('content nonconceptualism'), or whether nonconceptual and

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<sup>63</sup> See T. M. Crowther (2006) and York Gunther's introductory essay in *Essays on Nonconceptual Content* (2003) for helpful discussions of how different notions of nonconceptuality are dependent on how one characterizes both conceptuality and what is meant by 'non.' The embarrassing lack of agreement on what a concept is has led most papers concerning nonconceptuality to begin with an explicit stipulation. Nevertheless, as is also commonly pointed out, there remains significant variation. See Hanna and Chadha (2009) for a description of seven competing contemporary theories (not including their own) of what a concept is. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, for purposes of this dissertation we will elect McDowell's version—unquestionably the most popular of the conceptualist positions.

<sup>64</sup> For example, see Brewer (2005) and Byrne (2005) on the side of conceptualism and Bermudez (2007) and Toribio (2008) on the side of nonconceptualism. This is certainly not the only general definition, however. For example, Hanna and Chadha (2009) make the compelling case that both concepts and our understanding of nonconceptualism ought to be essentially Kantian in nature, with the guiding question being whether we can cognitively encounter things (or perceive) in a manner wholly unmediated by concepts.

nonconceptual states share the same kind of content but differ in terms of the relationship between the subject and those states. According to the latter view ('state nonconceptualism'), subjects can stand in a relationship to the contents of a perception that is either concept-dependent (and thus conceptual) or concept-independent (and thus nonconceptual). In other words, while the content of a perception  $p$  might be identical to content of the conceptual judgment that  $p$ , a subject might nonetheless perceive  $p$  without possessing the concepts needed to specify  $p$ , and thus possess  $p$  in a concept-independent manner. A subject cannot be in a concept-dependent state without possessing the concepts needed to specify the content of that state, whereas she can be in a concept-independent state while lacking some or all of the necessary concepts. State nonconceptualism then is a matter of *possession-conditions* that constitute one's conceptual access to a given content, whereas content nonconceptualism is a matter of *composition* or how a content is constituted. Content nonconceptualism entails state nonconceptualism, but not the reverse.<sup>65</sup> While nearly everyone discussing the debate in the last decade appeals to the content vs. state distinction, many of the relevant arguments in the debate predate the distinction, and it is sometimes difficult to tell to which form of nonconceptualism the arguments are meant to apply.<sup>66</sup>

Recent proponents have focused on content nonconceptualism. Positing state nonconceptualism is generally acknowledged as compatible with content conceptualism.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Toribio (2008) disputes this and argues that given the debate's notion of content, state nonconceptualism does entail content nonconceptualism.

<sup>66</sup> Heck (2000) is the first to introduce the distinction. Speaks (2005) notes the confusion in deciphering which type of nonconceptualism is being endorsed. He also tries to show that the current arguments if interpreted as a defense of state nonconceptualism fail to overcome the conceptualist challenge.

<sup>67</sup> See Speaks (2005). Again, however, this isn't universally accepted; see Toribio (2008).

More importantly for our present purposes, both Dreyfus and McDowell are concerned with the contents of perception. Consequently content nonconceptualism will be my focus here.

It is important to note three features of what is meant by the *content* of a perception. First, 'content' is generally meant to capture the truth-valuable, propositional nature of perceptual experience (or some other form of assessable accuracy of the information given in perception). The content of a perception—that toward which the perceiver is directed—has truth conditions or accuracy conditions. Second, perceptual content is a mental phenomenon, something grasped in minds. Third, and more controversially, 'content' is usually taken to convey the representational nature of perception. Perceptual capacities are taken to be capacities for representing and presenting features of the environment to the perceiver. While most proponents of nonconceptualism appear to agree on this point, opponents are sometimes perceptual disjunctivists (naïve realists) who argue that perception is a relation with the actual environment and not a representational content.<sup>68</sup>

Next, it should be noted that there are two types of content nonconceptualists. Total content nonconceptualists hold that all perceptual content is exhaustively nonconceptual.<sup>69</sup> Partial content nonconceptualists, on the other hand, hold that while

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<sup>68</sup> Brewer is a prime example. As we will see in Chapter Three, McDowell's disjunctivist view is more nuanced: perceptual content *is* representational content, but it is nonetheless a matter of relation to the actual environment and not a matter of relation to representations of the environment.

<sup>69</sup> Evans (1982) is sometimes taken as a total content nonconceptualist. Stalnaker (1998) also makes a claim to total content nonconceptualism, but what he means by nonconceptual is idiosyncratic to the rest of the debate (i.e., that perception and belief are not composed of Fregean concepts). Note that total content nonconceptualism is the reverse of McDowell's belief that the content of perception is exhaustively conceptual.

every perception contains nonconceptual content, at least certain kinds of perception can likewise contain conceptual content.<sup>70</sup>

We need to discuss one more preliminary concerning the debate over nonconceptualism before turning specifically to Dreyfus's position—namely, the assumptions concerning conceptuality and propositions. Propositions understood as truth-valuable entities are often seen as paradigmatically conceptual, and concepts are frequently defined as constituents of propositions.<sup>71</sup> Consequently, if one takes perception to be exhaustively amenable to propositional articulation (as McDowell argues in both *Mind and World* and in the early stages of his debate with Dreyfus), this is sometimes taken as justification for endorsing total content conceptuality. Likewise, various lines of defense of nonconceptualism (including Dreyfus's) have turned on an analysis of perception that reveals certain aspects of perception as inappropriate to or not specifiable in propositional terms (i.e., lacking truth conditions). For example, some philosophers have claimed that certain perceptions are in some sense ineffable or too finely grained<sup>72</sup> or situation-dependent.

Nevertheless, it is not clear that the propositionality of perception can decide the matter. On the one hand, there are notions of conceptuality that outstrip propositionality

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<sup>70</sup> Bermudez (2007) and Hanna and Chadha (2009) are good examples of partial content nonconceptualists. One might also hold nonconceptual content as a perceptual possibility while denying that it is a feature of all perceptions. This position, however, is largely ignored in the literature. Jan Almäng (2008) is an exception; he argues against total content conceptualism by positing what he calls “conditional affordances”—a kind of perception available to cognition but necessarily nonconceptual because unavailable for public ostension.

<sup>71</sup> This is a common Fregean claim: concepts are the constituents of propositions and present the proposition (i.e., the referent of a thought or expression) in a given mode.

<sup>72</sup> The fineness of grain argument can be interpreted in such a way as to merely support state nonconceptualism, and so strategically taken to support content conceptualism. For a discussion, see Hanna and Chadha (2009).

(e.g., McDowell's more recent position which will be discussed detail in Chapter 3), so that a perception might be conceptual without being (at least initially) propositional.<sup>73</sup>

Likewise, one can grant a perception as being in principle specifiable in propositional terms while maintaining that it is genuinely nonconceptual.<sup>74</sup> It may be possible (e.g., for an external observer) to appropriately specify propositional accuracy conditions for a given perception without such conditions being an aspect of the perceiver's experience. That is, (accurately) claiming that a perception is amenable to propositional specification is not (at least without further argument) justification for the further assertion that the perception is conceptual. Additionally, one needs to determine whether the in-principle propositional specification is a part of the perceiver's perception.<sup>75</sup> Particularly given the large role propositionality plays in the Dreyfus-McDowell debate—with McDowell claiming both that perception and experience is exhaustively characterizable in propositional terms and that this is evidence of its conceptuality, and Dreyfus attempting to highlight various aspects of perception and experience that are not amenable to propositional articulation—it is important to stress the indeterminate relevance of propositionality. Once again, before leveraging propositionality for or against the possibility of nonconceptual content, one

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<sup>73</sup> See Kukla and Lance (2009) for another conceptualist example.

<sup>74</sup> As Bermudéz notes, "I can think of no reason for holding that a state with nonconceptual content cannot have conceptually specifiable correctness conditions. Quite the opposite, in fact. An account of nonconceptual content is plausible only to the extent that it gives us a theoretical tool for characterizing and communicating the content of perception. . . . The important point is that the theoretical specification is given in terms of concepts that the perceiver need not possess" (2007: 65). While this possibility is obvious for state nonconceptualism, Bermudéz holds this to be true for the content nonconceptualist as well.

<sup>75</sup> One can imagine a McDowellian conceptualist discussing non-rational animal perception and responsiveness as in-principle specifiable in propositional terms while denying that the animal's perception itself is conceptual since the animal lacks rational capacities. Two theorists might make similarly arguments concerning skillful coping and yet affirm opposite positions concerning the conceptuality of coping.

must first fix and defend a notion of the conceptual as well as the relation between the conceptual and the propositional.

## II. Situating Dreyfus

Given the contours of the debate outlined above, we can see that situating Dreyfus within this debate is tricky for a number of reasons. First as noted, almost all theorists in the debate assume that content—conceptual or nonconceptual—is representational and truth-valuable (i.e., propositional). As we saw in Chapter One, Dreyfus adamantly maintains both the non-representational and non-propositional nature of at least a large portion if not all of perceptual experience. Initially and for the most part we perceive our situations holistically (as opposed to perceiving representable features) and respond to the affordances for action or tensions within the situation rather than to the facts or isolable features of the situation.<sup>76</sup>

Second, perceptual content (or for that matter, content of any kind possessed by humans) is almost universally assumed to be had as a mental state. ‘Content’ is mental content. The assumption is that intentionality is essentially and wholly a mental or cognitive activity—it’s about the way our *minds* access intentional objects.<sup>77</sup> Dreyfus

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<sup>76</sup> (2007a): 356-360; see also (2002).

<sup>77</sup> For example, in summarizing the nonconceptualist position Hanna and Chadha (2009) say, “Non-Conceptualism says that our cognitive access to the targets of intentionality is not necessarily mediated by concepts and in fact sometimes wholly unmediated by concepts.” Even Almäng (2008) who argues for a kind of perception dependent on one’s particular embodiment makes this perception a cognitive (or at least cognitively available) phenomenon. The notable exceptions are Sean Kelly (2001a and 2001b), a former student of Dreyfus, and Adrian Cussins (2003) who attempts to situate Dreyfus’s examples and insights (conspicuously, without citing him) into a neo-Fregean theory of content. Nevertheless, Cussins is largely ignored, and even in responding to Kelly, participants in the debate assume a mentalist framework.

conspicuously titles his attack on McDowell “Return of the Myth of the Mental.”<sup>78</sup> Related to this point, while Dreyfus speaks of perceptual experience in intentional terms, he denies the assumption that all intentional states are mental states. In claiming that certain aspects of our non-mental experience are genuinely intentional, he is not speaking of perceptual, subpersonal information processing. Instead, he advocates a normatively governed, non-causal form of embodied intentionality that he calls (following Merleau-Ponty) motor intentionality. In coping with our environment, our bodies respond normatively in order to fulfill existential goals that may or may not be explicit in our consciousness.<sup>79</sup> Motor intentionality can and optimally does operate independently of reflection. Thus motor intentional objects of perception are not a matter of cognitive access to the world or mental content.

Finally, situating Dreyfus is difficult since although he speaks of and uses perceptual examples, perception is not a matter of passive or merely mental reception for Dreyfus, nor is perception his primary concern when it comes to nonconceptual content. Rather, perception is intimately related to embodied skills and action. It is first, almost always a matter of our bodies grasping and coping with their immediate environment without what we perceive ever rising to the level of cognitive awareness; and second, what we perceive is in part a function of the skills we’ve developed.<sup>80</sup> Most importantly, it is the intentionality instantiated in norm-governed actions and the intelligent understanding of one’s environment manifest in such actions—that is, motor intentional actions—and *not* the

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<sup>78</sup> Just as conspicuous is the title to Samuel Todes (2001) post-humously reworked dissertation *Body and World* for which Dreyfus writes both a foreword and an introduction—an obvious allusion to *Mind and World* and a clear precursor to Dreyfus’s attack on McDowell.

<sup>79</sup> See (2007a) and (2000a).

<sup>80</sup> See his remarks on the intentional arc in (2005): 3-4 and in (2002): 368-373.

content of thoughts or even primarily perception—that Dreyfus claims as fundamentally nonconceptual. We cope with our environments in non-mental but intentional (as opposed to merely causal) ways, and it is the intentionality of this manner of coping that serves as Dreyfus’s primary locus of nonconceptuality.

For example, walking along a path I might perceive a small stone<sup>81</sup> (and might do so without judging *that* there is a stone). Whether or not my perception contains a judgment, however, my body’s skillful ability to cope with paths and stones endows the perception with a certain significance. In dealing with the stone, this significance, while contained in the perception, is manifest not in thought, but rather in the way my body responds to the perception. Without ever forming judgments or reflecting on features, in the normal course of walking by or over or stepping on the stone, my body will adjust as needed; perhaps my body physically anticipates the feel of a smooth hard surface under my foot. Again, I may never be consciously aware of this physical expectation that the perception arouses. This fact is highlighted in the case of the stone not being a stone at all, but rather a trick of sunlight. Perhaps I stumble slightly, my body having anticipated to step on a more solid and slightly elevated surface. Perhaps it is only as I stumble that I become aware of my failed anticipation. For Dreyfus, the perception itself, if it never rises to the level of a conscious judgment (just as most perceptions do not) is nonconceptual. More importantly, however, the significance of the perception and our body’s skillful and intelligent adjustments—its general readiness to cope with the environment (e.g., being oriented to the difficulties of

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<sup>81</sup> The example is Merleau-Ponty’s; see (1958) 346. Dreyfus’s extreme examples of expert coping in difficult scenarios tend to receive most of the attention; it’s important to remember that for Dreyfus skillful coping and its attendant nonconceptual “content” is ubiquitous.

walking up a rocky path), the motor intentional manner in which we interact with the path and the “stone”—are all nonconceptual.

The mild shock I feel when I discover a lit patch of ground and not a stone is a matter of failed bodily (and non-cognitive) anticipation rather than failed judgment—that is, it is a matter of what Dreyfus calls bodily conditions of improvement rather than cognitive accuracy conditions. Importantly, bodily conditions of improvement are multidimensional rather than binary, a matter of our bodies continually moving towards an “optimal grip” on the situation. In other words, unlike the accuracy conditions involved in judgment, embodied coping (e.g., when skillfully walking along a rocky path) is characterized by the various ways in which one might best resolve the bodily tensions inherent in one’s (often non-cognitive) perception of the situation and obtain a felt sense of equilibrium.<sup>82</sup>

Thus for Dreyfus, nonconceptuality is more than a matter of perception and whether those perceptions can become the content of a judgment. It is a matter of embodied engagement with the environment that is entirely independent of and practically incompatible with reflective or linguistic articulation. While not denying its cognitive significance, perception is primarily a bodily phenomenon, containing conditions of improvement rather than truth or accuracy conditions. Consequently, there is no straightforward mapping of Dreyfus’s claims onto the current debate. What this means is that even an initial characterization of Dreyfus’s position such as I will attempt here requires a careful use of stipulations and explicit contrast with the generally accepted

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<sup>82</sup> Dreyfus commonly discusses conditions of improvement; see especially (1999) and (2002) and (2005). I will discuss this phenomenon in much more detail below.

object and scope of the debate. In order to do so, we first need to look more closely at just what is entailed in his Nonconceptual Coping Thesis, and it is to this thesis that I now turn.

### *Dreyfus's Nonconceptual Coping Thesis*

In Chapter 1 we defined Dreyfus's Nonconceptual Coping Thesis thus:

“The phenomena show that embodied skills, when we are fully absorbed in enacting them, have a kind of non-mental content that is non-conceptual, non-propositional, non-rational and non-linguistic.” As humans we are primarily and for the most part open to and interact with a world that is made up of “the totality of interconnected [and nonconceptual] solicitations that attract or repulse us.”<sup>83</sup>

The thesis consists of three main parts:

1. A commitment to phenomenological methodology
2. A negative claim: what phenomenology reveals that our coping experience is *not*
3. A positive claim: what phenomenology reveals that our coping experience *is*

I will examine each of these in turn. In doing so we will not only get a clearer picture of what the Nonconceptual Coping Thesis entails, but likewise a better understanding of the main targets of Dreyfus's phenomenological criticism.

In Chapter One we discussed briefly Dreyfus's commitment to the phenomenological methodology embedded in this thesis (“The phenomena show...”). The importance of this commitment for Dreyfus justifies another look. Following Heidegger, Dreyfus believes that the philosophical tradition has unwittingly “covered up” or distorted its main object of

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<sup>83</sup> (2007a): 360, 357.

human experience, precisely because it has not “let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself.”<sup>84</sup> That is, in the course of investigation our tendency is to decontextualize the phenomena under examination, most notably by approaching the phenomena through reflection or third person (reflective) observation rather than as we deal with them naturally in experience. Phenomenology is primarily a matter of description, but in the sense of exhibiting what is described as it is experienced rather than as it observed.<sup>85</sup>

In investigating human perception then, it is critical that we are uncompromising in our commitment to examine perception as it is for us in experience and not as it is when we reflect on what we perceive. Even if we’re completely sensitive to our basic intuitions or the phenomenology of an experience, if that experience is “artificial” in the sense of occurring outside of its normal context—which includes explicit reflection on what would be an otherwise unreflective activity—then we are not allowing the phenomena to “be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself;” consequently, our otherwise flawless analysis of the experience will in fact yield a flawed understanding of what has taken place. Sean Kelly calls this The Refrigerator Light Hypothesis:

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

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<sup>84</sup> Heidegger (1962): 34/58.

<sup>85</sup> Heidegger (1962): 34-35/58-59; see also Dreyfus (1991): 30-39.

attention to it. This is a bad principle in the case of absorbed activity, just as in the case of refrigerator lights.<sup>86</sup>

In our characterization of an experience we must be sensitive to the way in which the experience actually takes place.

While this approach is shared by phenomenologists generally—including its use in contemporary philosophy of perception—existential phenomenology of the sort that Dreyfus is committed to is perhaps unique in its claim that the greatest distortion plaguing the philosophical tradition as a whole is its prejudice in characterizing human experience as dominated by rationality. That is, investigating human life as it shows up in reflection has understandably led philosophers to emphasize the rational aspects of experience (e.g., the judgment-like nature or warrant of perception); whereas, a more careful phenomenology of experience reveals that most of our (intentional) activities are performed independently of reflection. Methodologically, we need to be committed not just to “the things themselves,” but to the things themselves as experienced in our most basic, everyday ways of dealing with them.

This commitment to phenomenology is directly related to the negative claim of Dreyfus’s Thesis: careful attention to our experience (including perceptual experience) in everyday activities shows something very different than our explicit reflections on that experience.<sup>87</sup> Specifically, we find that in skillful coping with the world our experience is “of

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<sup>86</sup> Kelly (2005): 20.

<sup>87</sup> Concerning Heideggerian phenomenology, Joseph Schear (2007) states, “Heidegger stressed the importance of ‘negative assertions’ in phenomenology. Strategically clarifying what something is *not* can generally help foster a positive appreciation of what something is, but the rule of thumb holds especially well in phenomenology: showing that and how an understanding of some phenomenon is distorting is vital work for coaxing it into view –

non-mental content that is non-conceptual, non-propositional, non-rational and non-linguistic.” As he treats them in the debate, this string of adjectives is very close to mere emphatic repetition. Along with a great deal of contemporary philosophy, Dreyfus takes mental content to be propositional content—essentially characterized by its truth-valuable and shareable nature. Consequently, it is likewise essentially situation-independent or capable of being expressed outside of the situation in which the content is formed.

Rationality for Dreyfus is essentially the operation of rational capacities (such as judgment and inference) on propositional content; that is, rationality is something exercised on situation-independent content. This is true even when reflecting on one’s present circumstances (e.g., perceptions). He often speaks of reflection as an act of “stepping back” in order to grasp or characterize something in such a way that it could be communicated to or understood by someone outside of that context.<sup>88</sup> Capturing and sharing such propositional content is precisely what language allows us to do.

It’s important to note that beyond the claim that skillful coping is (optimally) unreflective (and the implication that it is not characterizable in context-independent terms), the negative claim of Dreyfus’s Nonconceptual Coping Thesis says little of relevance. While many have and some continue to hold to context-independent notions of rationality, many others (including McDowell) do not. The “situated” nature of human perception and cognition is today overwhelmingly acknowledged. As concerns our present investigation, if one adopts a traditional notion of context-independent rationality and

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letting it ‘show up’ – for a more faithful portrayal (127).” This is likewise an apt summary of Dreyfus’s overall strategy in the debate.

<sup>88</sup> E.g., (2007a): 354.

conceptuality, then McDowell too turns out to be a nonconceptualist.<sup>89</sup> Since Dreyfus attempts to make his arguments stick even against his updated understanding of McDowell (“our differences are still significant”<sup>90</sup>), it’s much more philosophically interesting to follow his lead and evaluate his claims against an understanding of situated rationality.

This picture (i.e., of minds reflectively abstracting from engaged activity in order to grasp truth-valuable and context-independent aspects of a situation that can be expressed via linguistic articulation) is interestingly something that Dreyfus both accepts and resists. He usually seems to accept this as a legitimate characterization of what takes place in our mental and linguistic life, while resisting the claim that it is also a legitimate characterization of what takes place in absorbed coping practices. That is, in his criticism of the tradition Dreyfus rarely disputes the understanding of how the refrigerator looks when the door’s open and the lights are on—he merely insists that it’s a very different picture when the door’s closed. As I argue below, his criticisms would be more trenchant if he turned his phenomenological gaze more carefully on the how things look with the door open.

Finally, the Nonconceptual Coping Thesis seeks to give a positive account of what we do find when we carefully examine our absorbed coping experiences—namely, that we experience a “totality of interconnected [and nonconceptual] solicitations that [immediately] attract or repulse us.”<sup>91</sup> This positive claim is a dense summation of our experience when skillfully and unreflectively coping. Unable to distill everything relevant, I will unpack the claim by reducing it to three themes Dreyfus focuses on in the debate and

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<sup>89</sup> Hanna and Chadha (2009) can be interpreted as attempting something very close to this strategy.

<sup>90</sup> (2007b): 371.

<sup>91</sup> (2007a): 357.

which crop up repeatedly in his work. (Below I will say much more about the phenomenon of skillful coping itself and its relevance to Dreyfus's position.) First, as we've already seen, Dreyfus claims that important and ubiquitous aspects of our embodied experience simply cannot—even in principle—be captured in propositional terms. Perhaps the most important of these are the affordances given in human perception. Affordances are characterized in terms of conditions of improvement, rather than conditions of truth or accuracy; they are a matter of how the environment perceptually communicates with our bodies and facilitates fluid action; and the content of this communication is a matter of how our bodies respond, the tensions that polarize any given situation, and our anticipations, bodily readiness, and constant physical adjustments in order to cope with or avail ourselves of those affordances. Second, the kind of intentionality experienced in absorbed coping and response to affordances—namely, motor intentionality—is situation-specific. There is no access to affordances outside of the situation—if one is to experience or share them, one must (to a sufficient degree<sup>92</sup>) share the situation. Finally, there is no ego, no self-referentiality, no Kantian “I-think” involved in fully absorbed coping experiences, not even implicitly. “In fully absorbed coping, there is no immersed ego, not even an implicit one.”<sup>93</sup> A careful phenomenology of first-personal experience reveals no “person” when one is completely absorbed in skillful activity.

For example, part of the perception of a painting is often the solicitation to back up or step forward in order to view the painting from a more optimal position. Such conditions

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<sup>92</sup> One need not actually be in the situation. For example, one might remember a former scenario and still be bodily aroused by its affordances. Likewise, one might behold the situation as a spectator, such as when one watches a sports game and unreflectively moves one's body in response to situations the athlete(s) faces.

<sup>93</sup> (2007a): 374; see also 373-376 and Kelly and Dreyfus (2007).

of improvement are experienced immediately, as a felt tension in the perceived situation soliciting our bodies to adjust in order to reduce that tension. These conditions of improvement are not a matter of belief (though they may give rise to beliefs if reflected upon) and are not a matter simply of how the world is (i.e., they are not truth-conditions); rather, they are a matter of a non-cognitive grasp of how I ought to be or move in order to improve my relation with the world.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, an absorbed experience of the painting is not self-conscious, not the experience of a subject seeing a painting. Rather, the scene and its solicitations exhaust the experience.

#### *Situating Dreyfus: a second attempt*

Having elucidated Dreyfus's Nonconceptual Coping Thesis, we will return to the question of where this thesis places him vis-à-vis the debate over nonconceptuality. To begin, we can see from the Nonconceptual Coping Thesis that Dreyfus takes himself to be a proponent of a form of content nonconceptualism. As noted, he spends much of his time in the debate exhibiting and elucidating a *kind* of perception that he believes is not, even in principle, characterizable in conceptual terms. There are a number of difficulties, however, with applying the label content nonconceptualism as it's used in the literature. We'll start with the issue of 'content.' The (generally assumed) representational aspect of content might be circumnavigated by noting that Dreyfus, like McDowell and Brewer, is a naïve realist. Whether perceptual content is necessarily representational (and what is meant by representational) is a matter of contemporary debate, and Dreyfus can be interpreted as

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<sup>94</sup> See Kelly and Dreyfus (2007).

ving for a non-representational (or nuanced) understanding of content, just as other naïve realists.

This, however, is not the only difficulty. As we have seen, for Dreyfus, it is less a matter of our minds being perceptually opened directly onto our environment than of our bodies coping directly with it. Thus, while Hanna and Chadha claim that one purpose of *mental (intentional) content* “is inherently to guide . . . practical action and to mediate its directedness to its intentional targets,”<sup>95</sup> Dreyfus cuts out the cognitive middle-man. When fluidly coping we respond directly and meaningfully to the environment without representational *or* cognitive mediation.

This distinction is particularly relevant when it comes to the truth-valuable nature of the experience. Again as we’ve seen, since for Dreyfus perceptual experience is primarily a matter of coping fluidly with our environment, rather than exercising reflective capacities, contra other naïve realists he claims that (at least much of) this experience does not possess truth conditions. Instead, as when negotiating a path or viewing a painting we’re “drawn” to adjust our position or take certain actions or to bodily anticipate certain environmental interactions in order to fulfill conditions of improvement. Thus, as he sees it, Dreyfus is trying to highlight elements of human experience that are fundamentally nonconceptual. Coping is not a matter of failing to possess the concepts needed to characterize a perception, nor is it a matter of perceptual information unmediated by concepts; rather, it is about perceiving aspects of the world that lack a truth- or accuracy-condition and are consequently of a different kind than conceptual content. In addition to being a matter of degree as opposed to a binary quality, perceiving conditions of

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<sup>95</sup> (2009): 185.

improvement, unlike truth or accuracy, will at least in some cases be a multi-dimensional affair, since one's grasp can be improved in multiple ways. Likewise, however, perception in coping is of a different kind than 'content' altogether as it's generally understood by both sides of the debate.

Consequently, Dreyfus is not a *content* nonconceptualist in the standard sense. Rather, he is a kind of non-content experiential nonconceptualist.<sup>96</sup> More accurately, Dreyfus's claims are indifferent to the specifics of the debate as usually framed—whether the kinds of perceptual content or capabilities discussed in the greater debate over nonconceptual content turn out to be conceptual is irrelevant to Dreyfus's main claims.<sup>97</sup> Instead, he enters the debate from a novel (or at least, rarely discussed) position, emphasizing different aspects of our perceptual and engaged experience than those discussed in the debate over nonconceptual content.<sup>98</sup> Rather than a propositional or mental phenomenon, Dreyfus's nonconceptual "content" refers to meaningful human experience, including perceptual experience, as *intentionally* and *normatively* structured.

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<sup>96</sup> The fact that Dreyfus's motor-intentional content is not content in anything like the conventional sense deserves special emphasis. Nevertheless, throughout his debate and in much of his writings he uses the word content when discussing perception and experience, including those aspects he holds as nonconceptual. Consequently, I adopt his usage when describing his position.

<sup>97</sup> At one point in the debate, Dreyfus does appeal to perceptual constants (shape, color, size), but his point is to claim that perceptual constancy is a matter of our embodied engagement rather than cognitive content. Even when Dreyfus discusses aspects of perception commonly appealed to in the debate over nonconceptual content, it is in the service of a different agenda.

<sup>98</sup> As noted above, while Dreyfus directly engages McDowell's conceptualism, it is not clear whether he is aware of the greater debate over nonconceptuality. While I attempt to situate him with respect to this debate, I do not mean to imply that he specifically intends to shift or influence it.

As concerns the greater debate, Dreyfus's claims are most similar to Adrian Cussins's (2003<sup>99</sup>) view of nonconceptual content. Cussins suggests that experience ought to be analyzed in terms of its mode of presentation. This allows for a "range of contents," including contents whose structure "is fixed by the normative conditions that govern thoughts" (i.e., truth, success, accuracy), and contents whose structure is fixed by the norms that govern actions. Nonconceptual content can be understood as the possibilities inherent in perception for appropriate action (what Cussins calls "activity trails") rather than truth-conditions.<sup>100</sup>

There remain important differences between the two, however. Most importantly, while eschewing truth conditions, Cussins nonetheless characterizes his "activity trails" in terms of success conditions. The possibilities afforded in skillful activity either do or do not conform to the governing norms. As we've already noted, Dreyfus prefers conditions of improvement. Availing oneself of an affordance is often best understood in terms of acting to reduce a tension within a given situation. Improvement is a matter of degree rather than a dichotomy. Also, acting appropriately is a matter of learning to holistically take into account the web of interconnected possibilities for action and be drawn into the most appropriate course of action. This means one will always be moved toward some and away from other possibilities of acting, as laid out by one's embedded embodiment—once again, a matter of degree rather than of successfully or unsuccessfully conforming to a norm.

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<sup>99</sup> In 2003 Cussins updated his (1990) connectionist theory of nonconceptual content with a substantive postscript. His original essay emphasized the situation-specific indexical and perspectival nature of perception. As noted above, his 2003 postscript makes direct use of Dreyfus's examples and language in order to work out a neo-Fregean theory of content that accounts for a certain kind of perceptual affordance. As noted earlier, while Cussins is occasionally mentioned, his ideas are not seriously engaged, nor has he made efforts to further engage other participants in the debate.

<sup>100</sup> (2003): 147-159.

Dreyfus's position also implies that responding holistically to competing tensions will sometimes entail acting in ways for which no prior norm exists, but which extends the goals of one's existential commitments. As noted above, reducing tension might not be a matter of moving toward a specifically identifiable optimal state. Rather than digitally structured truth- or accuracy-conditions, improvement can mean movement on multiple dimensions or be a matter of multiple possibilities for a reduction of a felt tension. Finally, while Cussins stresses the similarity between the nonconceptual content at play in human and animal activity, Dreyfus notes that unlike animals, in humans the motor intentional pull or tension that structures one's field of possibilities is a matter of being attuned to sometimes completely explicit, rational goals—such as taking up the game of baseball, or moving to a new country and adopting its form of currency.<sup>101</sup> Despite these differences, the similarity of Cussins's position within the debate helps us better understand how to situate Dreyfus.

José Bermúdez has recently broken down advocacy of nonconceptual content into three separate categories with potentially different contents: nonconceptual (but genuinely representational) content at the subpersonal information processing level, nonconceptual content in perception of mature humans, and nonconceptual content in psychological explanations of perception in pre- and non-linguistic animals.<sup>102</sup> Dreyfus is arguing in favor of a fourth category: *content nonconceptualism at the level of skillful coping, including the*

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<sup>101</sup> This difference, however, is more a lacuna in Cussins's discussion and not an incompatibility between them. Also, these claims are less apparent in Dreyfus's debate with McDowell, where Dreyfus primarily emphasizes our ability to either resist or allow ourselves to be drawn into the affordances of a situation as the primary aspect that separates us from animals. Examples of our sensitive, embodied attunement to values resulting from explicit, reflective goals, however, can be seen his criticisms of John Searle; see Dreyfus (1999).

<sup>102</sup> See Bermúdez (2007) and (2011)

*perceptual content involved in motor intentionality, where ‘content’ is understood experientially and not as a matter of cognitive accessibility to perceptual information—that is, as solicitations to act in situation-appropriate ways and the appropriate embodied responses to those solicitations.*

Likewise, it is difficult to discern whether Dreyfus should be characterized as a total or partial nonconceptualist. He often says things like the “our capacity for detached abstract [i.e., conceptual] thought grows out of and presupposes our involved situation-specific [i.e., nonconceptual] activity,”<sup>103</sup> and “our transparent coping with affordances become[s] explicit coping with objects.”<sup>104</sup> Such statements make it sound as if all meaningful human experience, and perceptual experience in particular, is in the first place nonconceptual (arriving first on the ground floor), and that the “content” of this experience gets taken up and *transformed* in reflective and linguistic activity, *becoming* conceptual.<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, it sometimes seems plausible to interpret him as a partial nonconceptualist. “Our fully absorbed responses to solicitations operate in the background to underlie and support even our situation-specific concepts, and agential activity.”<sup>106</sup> While we primarily interact with the world nonconceptually, it is possible for us to take a certain approach or adopt a reflective attitude in dealing with the world, engaging our conceptual faculties and thereby gleaning conceptual content. I suspect that this ambiguity

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<sup>103</sup> (2007b): 376.

<sup>104</sup> (2005): 18. This quote is taken from a question that Dreyfus poses, highlighting the difficulty of figuring out how such a transformation takes place.

<sup>105</sup> See (1991): 199-202 for a discussion of pre-conceptual content being transformed to become conceptually articulate content. Dreyfus describes the process as a matter of focus and “narrowing in” on experience in a way that is unlike our experience of coping. How such focus can transform the content, however, or why such a picture is not indicative of a single content in experience rather than of two kinds of content is not discussed.

<sup>106</sup> (2007b): 376.

is related to his genuine perplexity concerning how coping and reflection—the activities referenced in his two theses—ought to be reconciled.<sup>107</sup>

While superficially on the side of the nonconceptualists, it's clear that not only is Dreyfus focused on a different *kind* of nonconceptual experience than other advocates, but that his charge of mental chauvinism (if correct) applies just as much to the nonconceptualists as to the conceptualists. What's more, his most obvious point of agreement with those involved in the greater debate seems to be with the conceptualists who share his naïve realism.<sup>108</sup> Finally, with the exception of Kelly and Cussins (who wear their Dreyfusian influence on their sleeves), McDowell's philosophy aligns more closely than any of the nonconceptualists with Dreyfus's insights concerning the situation-specific and unreflective nature of practical activity.

The full title of Dreyfus's opening shot in the debate is "Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise." While the title may be appropriate enough, Dreyfus's main concern is to criticize the over-intellectualist tendencies of contemporary philosophers. Advocating a form of nonconceptualism, he takes McDowell—the most prominent contemporary conceptualist—as his arch-nemesis. Over the course of the debate he quickly recognized important mistakes in his initial characterization of McDowell, but he ultimately failed to

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<sup>107</sup> I get the impression that Dreyfus is in his gut a total nonconceptualist, but his inability to provide an answer for how nonconceptual experience can be made into conceptual content keeps him open to the possibility of partial nonconceptuality. Nevertheless, in the absence of clear textual support for this hypothesis, I simply acknowledge his ambiguity.

<sup>108</sup> While there is nothing inherent in nonconceptualism that prevents a nonconceptualist from being a naïve realist, the representational nature of conceptual content (including perceptual content) is usually stressed. Interestingly, Dreyfus's most obvious point of overlap with partial content nonconceptualists is the conspicuous need to account for content dualism.

recognize that with respect to the greater debate over nonconceptualism, he and McDowell share more in common than he does with most of McDowell's nonconceptualist opponents (the same may be true with respect to the contemporary philosophical scene in general). In this case, Dreyfus seems to prove wrong Sun Tzu's adage, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

### III. Dreyfus, language, and world-disclosure

In Chapter Three I will argue in favor of a McDowellian notion of conceptualism and show how Dreyfus's insights are amenable to this kind of conceptualism. First, however, I need to address Dreyfus's arguments concerning why they are not. As we've seen, Dreyfus's arguments in favor of nonconceptual content turn on his claim that certain aspects of perception and motor intentionality are nonconceptual because they are of a kind not amenable to propositions. His main evidence for this is linguistic—the relevant perceptions and kind of intentional actions he highlights lack truth conditions and so cannot be linguistically articulated. While only alluded to in the debate, Dreyfus makes additional arguments that language *cannot* express the nonconceptual content he elucidates because language is ontologically dependent on that nonconceptual content.<sup>109</sup> For Dreyfus, concepts are what language expresses, and concepts are ontologically dependent on skillful coping. Dreyfus is right to note the strong link between language and conceptuality, but wrong in the assumptions he makes concerning language. Specifically, as noted in Chapter One, Dreyfus maintains a presupposition concerning the propositional nature of language. As we will see, Dreyfus *does* acknowledge non-propositional forms of language, but in

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<sup>109</sup> Dreyfus does articulate this line of reasoning more explicitly in his reprisal of the debate; see (2013).

doing so posits a dualism in language that mirrors his dualism in experiential content. More important to my own purposes, the only reason Dreyfus has within his own framework for claiming that language remains ontologically dependent on skillful coping, rather than acknowledging its co-equal role along with other skillful capacities, is a (perhaps unwitting) assumption concerning language's propositional nature.

In the remainder of the chapter I will work to make these assumptions explicit and then argue both that Dreyfus is inconsistent in his characterization of language and in his claims concerning what constitutes the "background understanding" or "world" on the basis of which we are able to linguistically express ourselves. A more phenomenologically accurate picture of language—one that recognizes the non-propositional aspects of language—not only makes Dreyfus's position more consistent but likewise does a great deal to reduce the tension between his Nonconceptual Coping and Detachment Theses.

### *The traditional view of language and propositionality*

Dreyfus spends very little time in his works discussing language and certainly never attempts to work out a detailed description or explanation of language. Rather, his discussion of language is limited to commenting on and applying various statements of Heidegger concerning language, usually with an aim to evaluate others' claims concerning language.<sup>110</sup> To begin with, he acknowledges that not all speech acts are of the sort that can

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<sup>110</sup> So far as I know, Dreyfus has never attempted a clear or detailed explanation of language. Instead, like Heidegger in *Being and Time*, he pays much more attention to the transcendental conditions for language than to its operations or the various questions that have animated traditional philosophy of language. Given the importance of language to McDowell and its centrality in Dreyfus's criticisms, this is a striking lacuna. My analysis of Dreyfus's understanding of language is drawn largely from his debate with McDowell, his

be straightforwardly true or false. Instead he notes that assertions, which *can* be true or false, are just one special case of communicative behavior. He quotes Heidegger who states that one can also communicate by doing such things as assenting, refusing, demanding, warning, consulting, interceding, etc.<sup>111</sup> Despite this acknowledgment, Dreyfus spends no time elaborating on non-assertoric forms of language. As he notes, “Heidegger does not discuss [non-assertoric uses] of language.” Instead, “he begins at the level of interpretation with its thematizing assertions.”<sup>112</sup> Consequently, Dreyfus’s own work focuses almost exclusively on either assertions (capable of being true or false) or other philosophers’ notions of language.

As Dreyfus sees it, “the notion accepted from Descartes to Husserl [is] that language corresponds to or represents facts about the world and is used to communicate this factual information from one user to another.” This traditional representationalist, information-conveying view of language is one wherein “discrete elements [of language] represent discrete features of the world,”<sup>113</sup> with our expressions serving as a sort of code. When discussing his understanding of this traditional view of language, Dreyfus speaks of such things as rules, beliefs, representational knowledge or knowing-that, expressions of facts, etc.—all of which are propositional in nature.<sup>114</sup>

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commentary on *Being and Time*, and from (1998) and (2000b). In each case, Dreyfus endorses his understanding of Heidegger’s views on language.

<sup>111</sup> (1991): 220; Here Dreyfus quotes from Heidegger (1962): 204/162. Obviously some—though not all—of these diverse speech acts can be accomplished via propositional speech acts. I think it best to interpret Dreyfus (and Heidegger) here as recognizing both a pragmatic and semantic diversity in language.

<sup>112</sup> (1991): 208.

<sup>113</sup> (1998): 282.

<sup>114</sup> He likewise discusses views of language held by Donald Davidson and John Searle, wherein language is either a holistic system of beliefs or the conveyance of an intentional state, both of which are propositional in nature; see (1991): 218-221.

In the first instance then, Dreyfus does not appear directly guilty of a propositional presupposition concerning language. Rather, Dreyfus's presupposition is as follows:

Traditional notions of language, from Descartes to Searle conceive of language as propositional in nature.

Importantly, Dreyfus sees McDowell as part of this tradition. While McDowell rejects a representationalist understanding of language,<sup>115</sup> recognizing Dreyfus's assumptions concerning the tradition and McDowell as part of that tradition are critical to an analysis of the debate. Again, Dreyfus spends his time not in criticizing propositionalist assumptions about language, but in elucidating necessary transcendental conditions for propositional language (i.e., skillful coping and its attendant "world-disclosure").

While Dreyfus himself denies the traditional propositionalist view of language and acknowledges forms of communication that are not themselves true or false, he likewise acknowledges the obvious fact that we are *capable* of using language merely to convey propositions. This, I believe, is exactly what his Detachment Thesis amounts to: an acknowledgment that we can indeed "take a step back' from the immediate activity"<sup>116</sup> and reflect on and articulate what we see in the world propositionally. Since these situations and uses of language (which, we will see, Dreyfus considers to be "derivative") are what he takes the tradition to be exclusively focused on, and since most often it is this tradition that

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<sup>115</sup> As noted above, McDowell is a naïve realist. He explicitly rejects a representational theory of mind wherein we have access to the world only indirectly via our access to internal information processing, and also rejects any account of language that makes it primarily a medium that first represents and then serves as a vehicle for our thought. Instead, language is primarily a concrete instantiation of the space of reasons—"a repository. . . [of] what is a reason for what." (1994a): 126; see also 184-187. For his rejection of the computational theory of mind (including the notion that our access to the world is representationally mediated) see (1994b): 190-205.

<sup>116</sup> (1991): 211.

he is confronting, the presupposition of propositionality just given is usually quite clearly at play in his work.

Nonetheless, there is another sense in which I think Dreyfus maintains a presupposition of propositionality, though one quite different from that already discussed and one that takes a bit more background to bring into view. In order to see this second presupposition, more needs to be said about Dreyfus's positive views concerning language. Exploring Dreyfus's positive views on language will likewise help us to get clear on exactly why this additional presupposition is superfluous for Dreyfus.

#### *Dreyfus's considered view of language and propositionality*

In addition to his claims that there are aspects of experience that cannot be propositionally articulated, Dreyfus has a deeper claim concerning the fundamentally parasitic nature of both propositions and language. As we will see, although Dreyfus posits extra-propositional aspects of language, he recreates the dualism of his two theses in his overall understanding of language. And all language—that involved in merely practical activity as well as propositions—remains derivative of a background understanding of the world developed and constantly refined through skillful coping.

What is essential to all specifically linguistic acts for Dreyfus is that they are communicative tools that “point out aspects of [our] shared world;”<sup>117</sup> or more accurately, language “points out” or displays an object or other aspect of a given situation whose intelligibility is made possible on account of our shared “world” or background. I will use *display* in this context as a term of art for the basic function of everyday language as

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<sup>117</sup> (1991): 221.

described above and attributed to Dreyfus in this paragraph.<sup>118</sup> It's important to recognize that in discussing this feature of language, Dreyfus is not claiming that all linguistic acts describe or call attention to some determinate part of the world. Rather, for Dreyfus the intelligibility of the speech act is parasitic on an intelligibly disclosed world, which is itself manifest in the speech act. Thus, for example, the hypothetical question, "If there really is a seventh level to hell, is it more or less embarrassing to be visited by saintly non-residents than it is for those damned to merely the third level?" does not describe or indicate anything in the world. Nonetheless, the speech act is only intelligible for those within or familiar with a world-disclosure wherein things like hell and embarrassment are at least imaginative possibilities. Likewise, the question itself *displays* just these aspects of one's overall background understanding.

Normally, this displaying feature is an entirely practical activity, taking place in the midst of our practical engagements with the world. Linguistic and other expressive acts take place alongside our everyday practical coping as a means of orienting ourselves and our audience toward some narrow or determinate aspect of a situation.<sup>119</sup> Even in such practically engaged scenarios of mere display, however, Dreyfus emphasizes that the act of linguistically pointing something out "is possible only on the background of a shared world." This is because "what one communicates about is an aspect of that shared world"—that is, some aspect made mutually intelligible to the interlocutors on account of their

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<sup>118</sup> Dreyfus is following Macquarrie and Robinson's translation of 'aufzeigen' as 'pointing out' in their 1962 translation of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. I follow Albert Hofstadter's use of 'display' in his translation of Heidegger's *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* in order to avoid confusing the practical function of linguistic 'pointing out' with 'reference.' For a discussion of the differences between these translations see Blattner (2006): 103-106.

<sup>119</sup> See (1991): 208-211 where Dreyfus discusses *pointing out*, "*predicating*," and *communicating* as the basic structure of linguistic acts, all of which are in the first place merely practical activities.

having a shared background.<sup>120</sup> In addition, displaying, even as a practical activity, requires a background in order to contextualize, disambiguate, and give sense or meaning to what is expressed.<sup>121</sup> Members of a linguistic community come to share a background or world by being mutually socialized via our common (non-linguistic) coping practices and by developing a shared set of skills for dealing with things.<sup>122</sup> On the basis of having a shared world, aspects of that world can be displayed.

Language as a means to display, however, does not have to remain on a practical, engaged level. On the basis of our ability to linguistically display in context, we can take our displaying speech acts and shear off their context-dependent, practical function. Doing so is a matter of abstracting from the practical meaning of the speech act in context so as to obtain a statement that is *about* some aspect of our practical life (as opposed to a mere orienting toward that aspect). Doing so posits or predicates various properties of objects, which have been taken out of their practical context. How exactly this takes place is not given in any more detail.

While Dreyfus describes a process of language becoming “more and more remote from the immediate context,”<sup>123</sup> what he ends up with is another dualism which exactly parallels the dualism above: language as meaningful in terms of its practical, orienting effect in the context of practical activity and language as meaningful in terms of conveying information which can be understood outside of the immediate context in which it is uttered. The latter is still ultimately dependent on a background—that is, still requires an intelligible, intersubjective world disclosed by our skillful involvement. Nevertheless,

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<sup>120</sup> (1991): 221.

<sup>121</sup> (1991): 219-223; see also (1998): 283-284.

<sup>122</sup> (1991): 217.

<sup>123</sup> (1991): 209.

speech acts that convey information (i.e., share something objective about the world) have a meaning outside of the context of practical activity in which they are deployed by making use of a broader context of activity or some additional aspect of the shared world with which the interlocutors are familiar. Consequently, two superficially similar expressions of “This hammer is too heavy” can actually instantiate two different kinds of speech act—one in which I am merely orienting myself and others to my practical situation and one in which I convey objective, context-independent information.<sup>124</sup> Consequently, it is difficult to see Dreyfus’s discussion of “abstraction” here as anything other than a metaphorical description of the transition or interaction between the two halves of his linguistic dualism.<sup>125</sup> “Abstraction” merely posits the fact that we *do* (mysteriously) go from the one to the other.

We can get clearer still on Dreyfus’s general notion of language by saying a bit more about the relationship between non-linguistic coping, our background, and language. For Dreyfus, non-linguistic skillful coping or our pragmatic manner of making our way about the world and dealing with the things we encounter “structurally articulates”<sup>126</sup> an intelligible world. That is, our practical dealings with things in the course of performing various tasks—which is also for Dreyfus our primary and most common way of relating to

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<sup>124</sup> The example expression “The hammer is too heavy” is Dreyfus’s, though it is perhaps an unfortunate one since it risks conflating his discussion of practical vs. information conveying uses of language with Heidegger’s transition from the ready-to-hand to the present-at-hand, wherein Heidegger uses the same expression. We can obviously convey information about ready-to-hand entities, as Heidegger does throughout *Being and Time*. What’s more, we can assert things about ready-to-hand entities in such a way that our assertions display the ready-to-hand entities as such. For an excellent discussion see Schear (2007): 12-15.

<sup>125</sup> I return to and criticize Dreyfus’s notion of an incremental bridge between ontologically different categories of experience and expression in Chapter Four.

<sup>126</sup> See (1991): 215-217.

things—structures an intelligible world by both discriminating and relating things one to another. Something is intelligible if it can be both distinguished from and related to other things, activities, and roles in practical, skillful activity. Skillful interaction with things *both* presupposes and develops a practical, holistic background familiarity. This familiarity is always active, structurally articulating situations and manifest in the way that any concrete situation bodily solicits us to act in certain ways—a phenomenon which Dreyfus calls (following Merleau-Ponty) an intentional arc. “Our successful coping continually enriches the way things in the world show up.”<sup>127</sup> Our past experience in practically making our way about the world is sedimented in our present capacities for distinguishing and practically dealing with elements of our present environment. Within any given situation, we have a general “readiness” to deal with things: a basic familiarity with the environment and its objects, a sensitivity to the actions or possibilities afforded by that environment (including a literal, physical readiness or anticipation), and a basic disposition or orientation toward these objects and affordances.

This matrix of our skillful familiarity with and the correlative solicitations of any situation serve as a necessary background to understanding any specific thing.<sup>128</sup> This is what Dreyfus means by *world disclosure*. There exists an intentional arc in practical activity—a mutually enriching relationship between our skillful capacities and our perception and understanding of an environment. Out of this arises our basic familiarity with and sensitivity to any given situation. Any situation is thus meaningfully structured according to the various possibilities for action that are afforded. We always find ourselves

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<sup>127</sup> (2005): 3.

<sup>128</sup> See (1991): 102-107 and 184-192; for his discussion of solicitations see (2005): 10-14 and (2007a): 356-360.

attracted or repulsed by the interconnected web of possibilities disclosed by our skillful relationship with the environment.

It is only because we always already possess such a background, practical understanding of the way in which things are distinguished and related that we are able to then linguistically (or otherwise) express or communicate those things. This is because, as noted above, what gets expressed *just is* some aspect of a situation made intelligible on the basis of our background understanding. It is also because each expression requires a background in order to give a context and thus disambiguate and give sense to what is expressed. Consequently, “there cannot be any pointing out [e.g., linguistic expression] without the [structurally] articulated referential whole already being in place.”<sup>129</sup>

Importantly, for Dreyfus linguistic expression or other communicative activity never itself helps to structurally articulate the “referential whole” or our background familiarity and understanding of things and their practical relations. Language does not help to grant things their basic intelligibility; it does not disclose the world. Instead, language always expresses what one already understands practically. All linguistic expressions require a prior structural articulation in order to have meaning and be expressible. All language—whether an assertion capable of being true or false, an assertion that is wholly pragmatic, or some other type of expression—is a mere displaying of what has already been disclosed.<sup>130</sup> All *displaying* requires a prior world disclosure to *display*.

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<sup>129</sup> (1991): 216.

<sup>130</sup> Again, while Dreyfus focuses almost exclusively on assertions wherein one is literally *pointing* out by describing some aspect of the world, I think that he is making a more substantive point about language generally, wherein we *display* aspects of a world disclosure by at least referring to, indicating, or manifesting that disclosure when we speak, even when clearly not asserting.

Having looked at Dreyfus's positive account of language and its dependence on a prior, practical understanding of the world, we can now state Dreyfus's second, narrower presupposition of propositionality. This presupposition relates directly to why language cannot be involved in or adequate to everyday coping:

Language is propositional in that it requires specific, separable features of the world—the sort that are apt for composing propositions. This allows language to perform its essential functions: displaying, predicating, and communicating these specific features.

Dreyfus denies that language can be a part of the structural articulation of the world because he assumes that in order to function, language requires the world to already be structurally articulated such that specific, separable features are available to language. We do not, however, cope with specific, separable, features of the world; rather, we respond to and improve our capacity to cope with the affordances of our environment in order to maintain an optimal grip. Consequently, language—which deals in specific, separable features of the environment (i.e., is propositional)—is not a part of the coping that serves to disclose a world.<sup>131</sup>

Nevertheless, Dreyfus never actually justifies this claim. While it makes sense that in order to be expressive language requires a prior world disclosure, it is not at all clear why language cannot be a part of that disclosure. I think that the only motivation for this claim is a presupposition of propositionality such as the one I have described—the role of language is *merely* to express some feature of the way the world *is*, and expressing the way

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<sup>131</sup> See (2007a): 356-360. On page 358 he says, “in our everyday skillful coping we are not focusing on and naming fixed features. . . . Although when we step back and contemplate them *affordances* can be experienced as features of the world, when we respond to their *solicitations* they aren't figuring for a subject as a feature of the world.”

the world is does not itself meaningfully discriminate that world. Dreyfus seems to be either not fully aware that he makes this assumption about language, or else he uncritically accepts it as an assumption of the tradition and focuses his attack elsewhere without taking the time to lobby for or even develop a more comprehensive and adequate view of language. As I have shown, this is on display both in his debate with McDowell and in his other writings.

What we end up with, then, is a complicated, vague, and indirect notion of language put forth primarily for the purpose of critiquing the tradition. Nevertheless, one cannot always pin on Dreyfus's considered view the above presuppositions of propositionality. At this point what we have is Dreyfus's acknowledgment of and preoccupation with propositional forms of language (ones which require separable features of an environment), a commitment to certain forms of language which are (at least in their central function) not propositional (though still dependent on coping in order to display), and a conviction that the tradition (and particularly those with whom he's been in dialogue) by-and-large understands language propositionally.

On closer inspection what we see is that it is exactly the presuppositions above that create the tension between Dreyfus's two Theses. Spelling out why this is so will also help us to better understand the nature of the tension involved in Dreyfus's commitments. Toward this end, it will be helpful to review what has been said. In the course of analyzing his description of language and its necessary conditions, I have attributed the following claims to Dreyfus:

1. All language displays some aspect of a shared world

- a. One form of language is to display something in such a way as to merely pragmatically orient the interlocutors within their engaged activity
  - b. Another form of language displays in a way that is independent of an engaged activity, displaying something *about* some situation, and in which case a proposition is given
2. This linguistic displaying requires a background
- a. First, because what one displays is only intelligible on the basis of this background (one needs separable features to display)
  - b. And second, because the background serves to contextualize, disambiguate, and give meaning to each expression (which is particularly important in the case of propositional expressions which are otherwise decontextualized)
3. The background (constituted entirely by our skills and practices) is partly characterized by its being a web of practically grasped solicitations to act, and entirely lacks propositional structure.
4. Therefore, the background is not susceptible to linguistic articulation.<sup>132</sup>

### *Abandoning Dreyfus's presupposition*

There are two things to notice about this formulation of Dreyfus's view. First, as already noted there is a tension in (1) that mirrors and helps to elucidate the tension in his

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<sup>132</sup> Dreyfus claims, "The phenomena show that embodied skills, when we are absorbed in enacting them, have a kind of content which is non-conceptual, non-propositional, non-rational (even if rational means situation-specific), and non-linguistic." Here he claims that the background, or rather the skills which constitute the background, are not susceptible to either propositional or linguistic articulation. (2007a): 360.

Nonconceptual Coping and Detachment Theses. Dreyfus supplies us with a dualistic notion of language similar to his overall dualism concerning human intelligibility admitted to in the debate. On the one hand, language can be a tool, operating pragmatically in the same way as our skillful use of tools. On the other hand, language is able to propositionally express what has been made practically intelligible. How this can be the case is a puzzle, however, since Dreyfus claims that in propositionally expressing something we are expressing something (disengaged from the context in which it is first intelligible) that he has already concluded is entirely pre-linguistic and whose content is entirely non-propositional.

At this point it is mysterious how an entirely pragmatic expression of “This hammer is too heavy” can be *transformed* into something whose meaning is not pragmatic but propositional. This mystery is parallel to the mystery of where a propositional understanding of the world comes from when all understanding begins as and is grounded in something that is non-propositional—a matrix of skills and solicitations. This is the gap between his Nonconceptual Coping and Detachment Theses.<sup>133</sup> The tension in these theses arises out of Dreyfus’s inability to explain how potentially context-independent and propositional language is possible when language plays no role in the structural articulation of the world and the background of intelligibility that this supplies.

The second thing to notice is that the conclusion only follows if all linguistic expression *is* in fact propositional. One must maintain a presupposition of propositionality. It appears that this presupposition might be unintentional since, as we have already seen,

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<sup>133</sup> This gap, or at least something very similar is also the focus of Carman (2003); see especially, 204-263. Here Carman claims that explaining how it is that humans are able to have an explicit understanding *that* or *about* is the main goal of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.

Dreyfus does not think that all language is propositional. The problem is deeper when one considers what sort of non-propositional language Dreyfus acknowledges. As (1a) expresses, language can be used in an entirely pragmatic way, as a tool that allows us to narrow in on specific aspects of a situation or pragmatically orient ourselves and others toward those aspects.

The sticking point for Dreyfus is his denial of language's ability to help structurally articulate the world—a denial that language is one of the capacities that allows us to encounter the world as intelligible. In later chapters I will refute this claim and give specific arguments for why I think language does in fact work to structurally articulate and make the world intelligible. For now, however, I want to point out that this claim is in direct conflict with Dreyfus's other claims, and that it plays no significant role in his overall view. His presupposition of propositionality is superfluous to his overall position.

To make this clear, let us review what (1a) amounts to. I linguistically display by allowing some other to see a “shared problem [or other aspect of the situation], not some representation or meaning I have in mind. The ‘assertion’ is ‘apophantic’ in the Greek, but not in the traditional, sense of the word; i.e., it makes something manifest.”<sup>134</sup> While this pragmatic displaying might be predicative “in its grammatical sense,” it is *not* predicative in the sense of “attributing an abstractable *property* to a subject.”<sup>135</sup> Something is indeed communicated; it is not, however, information. Instead, “that which is ‘shared’ is our *being towards* what has been pointed out—a being in which we see it in common.”<sup>136</sup> In other words, what takes place in (1a) is merely a mutual, pragmatic orienting of the interlocutors

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<sup>134</sup> (1991): 209.

<sup>135</sup> (1991): 211.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.* Dreyfus is here quoting Heidegger (1962): 197/155.

toward some practical aspect of the situation. I want to emphasize two points about such pragmatic expression that Dreyfus, despite his acknowledgment of (1a), is clearly overlooking. First, *language expresses the structural articulation of the situation* and expresses it not propositionally but pragmatically. Language can thus literally express what is going on in our coping practices and can do so without transforming the content of such practices from practical to propositional. Second, *language is used like any other tool to skillfully cope with the situation*.

If then, language manifests the structural articulation of a situation and is one way of skillfully coping with that situation, we ought to ask why it is that language can't be used like the rest of skillful coping to structurally articulate? Why is it that language, at least in its pragmatic uses, cannot, along with our other skills, belong to the necessary background in light of which things are intelligibly encountered? Initially, one might think that it is because even this pragmatic display requires a meaningful world already disclosed and capable of being displayed (2a). Language remains in this sense parasitic on a prior world disclosure, and one could perhaps maintain that this prior disclosure is purely a matter of skillful coping. This response, however, only reiterates a double standard between language and skillful coping. According to Dreyfus, we also require at least a rudimentary grasp of things (i.e., background or world disclosure) in order to manipulate and cope with the world—tools, for example, must already be pragmatically understood and available in order for us to grasp and manipulate them. Any recognizably human activity requires this. Dreyfus never flinches in his acceptance that this fact doesn't then preclude our skillful manipulation of objects from working to likewise disclose the world—this is precisely the phenomenon of the feedback loop or the intentional arc. Our practical background

understanding arises out of skillful coping, which in turn requires some understanding in order to operate, which coping then further enriches that background understanding, etc. Given Dreyfus's endorsement of the intentional arc with regard to our skillful coping, the need for a background in order to linguistically display cannot be a reason why language is incapable of operating to disclose the world in parallel fashion.

Once again, the only reason for the double standard that I can think of is that here, as elsewhere, Dreyfus is *implicitly* presupposing the propositionality of even these pragmatic uses of language. If he more consistently maintained his claim that pragmatic uses of language are non-propositional, then his position would look something like the following:

- In order to show up as intelligible, objects and situations must be pragmatically recognized in terms of how they are distinguished from and related to everything else (i.e., structurally articulated).
- This sort of holistic discrimination takes place and is continually refined as we skillfully cope with the world around us. It also serves as a background familiarity, on the basis of which objects and situations show up.
- In such coping we are typically "absorbed," responding directly to affordances without propositional reflection.
- Sometimes such coping makes use of language in a transparent way to focus our own and others' attention on specific aspects of an overall situation. In such cases, language operates pragmatically (and non-propositionally) and becomes a part of our skillful coping (i.e., 1a above).

- Therefore, language is at least in principle one way in which things can be structurally discriminated. That is, language can operate to help disclose the world.

As is, his presupposition of propositionality for all language is superfluous to Dreyfus's overall position. He loses nothing by jettisoning this presupposition. Doing so, I think, is more a clarifying and coordinating of things he has already said than it is an abandonment of anything important. Skillful coping and situational affordances remain our primary engagement with the world—both in terms of its ubiquity and in terms of their structurally articulating the world meaningfully. If Dreyfus acknowledges language's ability when operating transparently and pragmatically to seamlessly integrate with our other bodily skills during the course of skillfully coping with a situation, then there is nothing in principle that keeps him from supporting the notion that language can also help to structurally articulate the world. Rather than detracting from his focus on our skillful coping practices and the meaningful background they impart, language merely becomes part of those practices.

As we will see in Chapter Four, the most important reason for jettisoning the presupposition that language is propositional is that it distorts the actual phenomenon of language. Acknowledging the complex and diverse ways in which language and skill integrate is simply more phenomenologically accurate. Language is not merely a second story phenomenon. Consequently, there is more work to do than merely abandoning Dreyfus's presupposition. At this point he is still left with a mysterious gap—a need to explain how one gets from pragmatic to propositional language and what exactly the relationship is between the two. Nevertheless, abandoning his principle that language never structurally articulates is an important first step in redeeming Dreyfus's

commitments—a slight modification that makes his overall position more consistent and phenomenologically accurate (if still inadequate).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Dreyfus's argument for nonconceptual experience focuses on the embodied phenomenon of skillful coping—our unreflective though personal-level, motor intentional means of discerning and responding to the objects and affordances of situations in such a way as to refine our practical understanding and “optimize our grip” (i.e., best cope with our circumstances). While his claims concerning nonconceptuality make him sound like a (perhaps total) content nonconceptualist, his phenomenology of an embodied and non-cognitive form of intentionality not only distinguishes him from other nonconceptualists, but in fact sets him outside of the typical framework in which the debate over nonconceptual content takes place. While he shares the anti-representational naïve realism common among conceptualists, he is not primarily focused on the cognitive access that perception imparts. Instead he emphasizes the situation-specific nature of our perception of affordances, our fluid, unmediated bodily responses to such perceptions, and the normative, embodied readiness of our situatedness—all of which he claims are incapable of propositional specification. Consequently, his denouncement of mental chauvinism in contemporary philosophy is just as appropriately leveled against the nonconceptualists as the conceptualists. Likewise, as we've seen, without further argument his phenomenological insights are available to either side of the debate.

While undeniably focused on the cognitive and conceptual nature of perception, McDowell's emphasis on situation-specific and unreflective practical comportment brings

him into closer alignment with Dreyfus than most members of the debate. Hence, not only does the actual debate between Dreyfus and McDowell reveal a host of similarities (as we saw in Chapter One), but situating Dreyfus's claims within the greater debate over nonconceptual content likewise highlights these similarities. In Chapter Three I will attempt to bring the two even closer by showing that McDowell's form of conceptualism does not have to be at odds with Dreyfus's phenomenology of skillful coping.

We laid the groundwork for such an argument in the second half of this chapter. Despite Dreyfus's clear acknowledgment of the wholly practical nature of some of our linguistic practices, he maintains an implicit presupposition of propositionality even for these linguistic practices. We saw that abandoning Dreyfus's presupposition of propositionality reveals the ability of language both to articulate our skillful coping activities and also to function as a part of our non-propositional, skillful disclosure of the world. By his own lights, Dreyfus ought to admit and incorporate this expanded role for language. Doing so does not resolve the tension inherent in his two Theses, but as we will see later, it is a critical first step.

Given the above, an obvious question is, are the sorts of non-propositional, pragmatic forms of language that Dreyfus acknowledges—language that is involved in the structural articulation of the world—conceptual or nonconceptual? As is clear from our discussion of the debate over nonconceptuality, before answering that question we need to settle the question of what conceptuality is. Answering these two questions and further elucidating the philosophical possibilities afforded by Dreyfus's and McDowell's debate is the goal of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MCDOWELLIAN CONCEPTUALITY: UPDATING THE DIALOGUE WITH DREYFUS

We can claim that we cannot be successfully onto objects without the actualization of a sortal discriminatory power, even while insisting that the actualization of that power in the sensory presence of the object is quite different from its actualization in judgmental sorting.

-Robert Pippin<sup>137</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is threefold: to carefully examine McDowell's most recent articulation of his conceptualism in contrast to the position he took in the debate, to see how this form of conceptualism stands up to the criticism of prominent non-conceptualists, and finally to see how this updated position interacts with Dreyfus's phenomenological insights and criticisms. As noted in Chapters One and Two, I'm convinced that despite McDowell's phenomenologically impoverished views and consistent propositional bias, he has in fact hit on the right understanding of conceptuality and the fact that our conceptual capacities suffuse our embodied, perceptual experience. That is, while McDowell then and now largely ignores the phenomenological insights concerning embodiment that Dreyfus emphasizes, his approach is preferable to Dreyfus's in large part because of its ability to make sense of these insights.

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<sup>137</sup> 2013: 104.

McDowell makes three critical moves that allow his account to do so. First, he renounces his former claim that experiential content is propositional content; instead, he offers a reworked Kantian account of experience as intuitional. Second, having severed conceptuality from propositionality, he links it instead to discursive activity. Third, he maintains the conceptual nature of intuition while acknowledging that intuitional content outstrips our ability to conceptually articulate our experiences. McDowell makes these moves in order to maintain his position between a mythical Given and coherentism, but does not explore the (seismic) implications of this shift. Importantly, while aspects of his debate with Dreyfus are on display in his more recent work, he does not explore the implications of this shift vis-à-vis that debate. If it can be shown that discursive activity outstrips propositions, then we have an account of conceptuality immune to Dreyfus's charge that experience cannot be exhaustively conceptual because aspects of experience are qualitatively non-propositional. Additionally, this would mean that McDowell's account has the potential to accommodate the insights that animate existential phenomenologists without positing a Dreyfusian dualism. As I will argue in subsequent chapters, McDowell's model for the unity of content "suffused" with rational capacities can be extended as a model for the unity of experience suffused with each of our bodily capacities.

Nevertheless, we need more than an ad hoc notion of conceptualism. A hybrid account that takes on board different insights is of little value if it cannot stand up on its own. Consequently, after first getting clear on what exactly McDowellian conceptualism is,

and before extending it to account for Dreyfus's insights, we will examine its basic plausibility, looking at how it fares against the recent forays of nonconceptualists.<sup>138</sup>

### **I. McDowell's shift to non-propositional conceptuality**

As we saw above, the overall thrust of McDowell's philosophy (in *Mind and World* and related works) is to first establish that our thoughts and expressions about the world can in fact *be* about the world (i.e., to establish their empirical basis), and second that such thoughts and expressions can rise to the level of knowledge (i.e., have an epistemological justification). In order to accomplish this, McDowell argues that human experience is conceptual all the way out—that our rational capacities are actually operative in the formation of even our most passive experiences. McDowell takes this to mean that all seeing is a seeing *that* things are thus and so, that the content of experience is propositional. His account is meant to steer an epistemological path between foundationalism and coherentism, allowing perceptual experience justificatory status without either reducing perceptions to merely causal events or detaching justification from the demands of the empirical world.

In "Avoiding the Myth of the Given" McDowell's goals remain the same. He continues his attempt to steer clear of epistemological "Givenness" in perceptual experience without falling into coherentism. In doing so he is specifically addressing the responses to *Mind and World* by Charles Travis, on the one hand, and Donald Davidson, on the other. McDowell defines the Myth of the Given in these terms:

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<sup>138</sup> In doing so, I agree with those who vindicate McDowell's intuitional account of conceptuality as a legitimate and plausible interpretation of Kant, though this is merely a by-product and not central to the concerns of this dissertation.

Givenness in the sense of a Myth would be an availability for cognition to subjects whose getting what is supposedly Given to them does not draw on capacities required for the sort of cognition in question. . . . being given something for knowledge without needing to have capacities that would be necessary for one to be able to get to know it. . . . it is a form of the Myth to think sensibility [i.e., what we perceptually share with animals] by itself, without any involvement of capacities that belong to our rationality, can make things available for our cognition. . . . [i.e.,] for the sort of cognition that draws on the subject's rational powers.<sup>139</sup>

The Sellarsian point<sup>140</sup> is that if it's the case that knowing something requires our having some capacity in order to know it, then we cannot be *given* knowledge devoid of those capacities. If knowing things requires what we know to be able to function in the space of reasons, then perceptual knowledge requires what we knowingly perceive to be such that it can function in the space of reasons. This in turn requires the operation of our rational faculties. Thus, as in *Mind and World*, McDowell's more recent work insists that we can have direct, noninferential knowledge through perception without falling prey to the Myth *only* if our rational capacities are drawn upon in the act of perception. While we share sensible capacities with animals, the content of our perceptions likewise involves rationality and so is of a different kind than that of animals. To deny this would entail denying one of several highly intuitive theses: that we actually gain noninferential, perceptual knowledge; that justification is an essential aspect of knowledge; or that we cannot gain knowledge without what we gain being able to stand in the space of reasons.

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<sup>139</sup> 2008a: 1-2; this definition of the Given will be important to our later discussion.

<sup>140</sup> Sellars (1963): §36.

“[Since] it is in experiencing itself that we have things perceptually given to us for knowledge[,] avoiding the Myth requires capacities that belong to reason to be operative in experiencing itself, not just in judgments in which we respond to experience.”<sup>141</sup> As he says elsewhere, human perception ought to be seen as a unique species of the genus animal perception—unique because in addition to our perceptual apparatus and our ability to respond differentially to the environment, rationality is involved in perception in such a way as to make perception itself a capacity for knowledge.<sup>142</sup>

This insistence on the involvement of our rational capacities in the act of perception is also what led McDowell in his earlier works to assume that all perceptual content is propositional content. Along with Kant, McDowell claims that our rational or conceptual capacities are our capacities to judge that something is so. It is easy then to assume that content formed by the operation of such capacities is propositional in nature, particularly in a philosophical climate that often takes the relationship between concepts and propositions as constitutive.<sup>143</sup>

This assumption, however, left McDowell open to Davidson’s response that if McDowell thinks experiential content is propositional content, then he must mean that experience is a matter of taking what we are causally given to be thus and so. This, however, is precisely what Davidson argues, allowing him to interpret McDowell as supporting rather than avoiding coherentism.<sup>144</sup> McDowell’s explicit repudiation of

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<sup>141</sup> 2008a: 3.

<sup>142</sup> See McDowell 2011.

<sup>143</sup> As McDowell states in a key paragraph in Lecture II of *Mind and World*, all experiential content is of the type *that things are thus and so*. “What one takes in is *that things are thus and so*. *That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience and it can also be the content of a judgement. . . . So it is conceptual content” (26).

<sup>144</sup> Davidson (1999).

propositionalism<sup>145</sup> is a direct response to Davidson's charge. "I want to insist, against Davidson, that experiencing is not taking things to be so;" rather, "experiences bring our surroundings into view."<sup>146</sup> That is, experience is a matter of McDowell's interpretation of Kantian intuitions—an unarticulated, pre-discursive, but unified content.<sup>147</sup> Intuitional content is available and amenable to discursive exploitation or "carving out" and "stringing . . . together," but often we do not do so. Since experience is intuitionally (and non-propositionally) having our surroundings in view rather than (propositionally) taking what the environment gives us as thus and so, the world itself is able to remain an epistemological tribunal (as opposed to Davidson's proposal that *how* we take the environment to be—e.g., thus and so—is subject to the tribunal of our overall set of beliefs).

While McDowell modifies his views to assert that our experience is not propositional—that is, our experience of the world is not (in the first place) a matter of

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<sup>145</sup> See 2008a, 3-9. Along with this, McDowell makes a second important shift. His earlier works assume that perceptual experience contained within it everything that one might noninferentially come to know in virtue of that perception. His claim now is that certain aspects of what a perception enables us to noninferentially know (e.g., that the red bird we see is a cardinal) need not be a part of the perception itself. That is, recognitional capacities need not be a part of the content of perception. Thus, even if I have the concept 'cardinal', that concept need not be an aspect of the content of my perception. Rather, the content of my perception might be identical to the perception of someone devoid of the concept cardinal. While some of the concepts involved in the knowledge made available by a perception need not be involved in the perception (e.g., 'cardinal'), not all concepts can be so excluded. McDowell draws the line at our "concepts of proper and common sensibles" (4)—e.g., "shape, size, position, movement or its absence" (5). This second change in McDowell's position is very much in tandem with his disavowal of perceptual propositionalism, but not directly relevant to our present purposes.

<sup>146</sup> 2008: 10; he is here playing on meaning of the German *Anschauung*, typically translated as intuition.

<sup>147</sup> It is worth noting that this interpretation of intuition is controversial. For example, it seems clear that Sellars would reject the notion of intuition as both pre-discursive and non-propositional.

seeing the world as thus and so—he nonetheless makes no retreat from his conceptualism. He maintains that experience is still conceptual all the way out, allowing it to stand as a tribunal to our claims. His shift is primarily in terms of what it means for experience to be conceptual and the manner in which perception opens us on to the world. McDowell now claims that perceptual experience (intuition) is conceptual because it entitles us to moves within the space of reasons—intuitional content is normative content. This entitlement does not stem from the sensible properties of intuition (i.e., the entitlement is not merely Given) any more than it does from our taking things to be so (i.e., the entitlement is not a matter of propositional judgment). Rather, the entitlement stems from the unity of intuitional content, which is the same unity had in judgments—both of which are a function of our rational (i.e., conceptual) capacities. “What accounts for the unity with which the associated content figures in the intuition is the same function that provides for the unity of judgments.”<sup>148</sup> While we do not reflectively or actively bring these capacities to bear in perceptual activity, they are nonetheless drawn upon or operational in our experience. Our conceptual capacities suffuse our perceptual experience, delivering experience (*pace Mind and World*) not in propositional form, but in a form ready to be discursively carved up and made the content of a judgment—that is, in a form capable of playing a normative role in the space of reasons.

In this sense McDowell replaces the link between concepts and propositions with a link to discursive activity. “We should centre our idea of the conceptual on the content of discursive activity.”<sup>149</sup> McDowell here, as in his debate with Dreyfus, understands concepts

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<sup>148</sup> 2008: 8.

<sup>149</sup> 2008: 6.

as that which language allows us to make explicit. Discursive activity is a matter of “isolat[ing] an aspect of the content of the intuition by determining it to be the content associated with a capacity to make predications in judgments.”<sup>150</sup> That is, discourse narrows in on an aspect of (unarticulated) intuition and makes it (i.e., “the very content that is already there in the intuition”<sup>151</sup>) the content of a discursive act (e.g., a judgment). Doing so always goes beyond intuition—even when re-articulating something with which we are already very familiar. This is because discourse is always a matter of taking some specific content, some specific aspect of experience, and putting it together with other aspects. Discourse for McDowell structurally articulates aspects already had in intuition. “In discursive dealings with content, one puts significances together.”<sup>152</sup>

Intuitional content is conceptual content because it is unified by our conceptual capacities and so had in a form that it is, though unarticulated, amenable to being broken up and made the content of discursive performances. “The unity of intuitional content reflects an operation of the same unifying function that is operative in the unity of judgments. . . . That is why it is right to say the content unified in intuitions is of the same kind as the content unified in judgments: that is, conceptual content.”<sup>153</sup> This fact also accounts for why perception entitles one to make moves within the space of reasons—the content of intuition is such that its significance can be structured or put together (e.g., in a judgment) in such a way as to embody normative force.

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> 2008: 7.

<sup>152</sup> 2008: 6.

<sup>153</sup> 2008: 7.

Two further items should be noted here because they will be important to our discussion below. First, as in his debate with Dreyfus, McDowell concedes that much of our intuitional content never does get so articulated. What is important to McDowell is that it *could be* so articulated: “an intuition’s content is all conceptual in this sense: it is in the intuition in a form in which one *could* make it, that very content, figure in discursive activity.”<sup>154</sup> Second, and perhaps more importantly, much of what remains unarticulated in intuition is not (yet) susceptible to being made the content of a discursive act because we do not (yet) have a means of expressing it. “There are typically aspects of the content of an intuition that the subject has no means of making discursively explicit.”<sup>155</sup> That is, perception often outstrips present discursive competence. Even here, however, the content of intuition can be *made* the content of a discursive act; doing so, however, requires one to “carve out” that content as the content of a new expression. “One would need to carve it out, as it were, from the categorically unified but as yet unarticulated content of the intuition by determining it to be the meaning of a linguistic expression, which one thereby sets up as a means for making that content explicit. This might be a matter of coining an adjective.”<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless, while we can do so, making all intuitional content in-principle articulable, we usually do not.

In summary, McDowell repudiates the claim that experiential content is propositional content. Instead, it remains an unarticulated, unified intuitional content, (which is how McDowell interprets Kant’s original sense of intuition). This repudiation, however, is not a repudiation of his main claim—that experience is conceptual “all the way

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<sup>154</sup> 2008: 8.

<sup>155</sup> 2008: 6.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

out.” Even acknowledging that the content of intuition often outstrips our (present) conceptual and discursive repertoire, this content remains conceptual in the sense that its unity is a function of our conceptual capacities and it is amenable to discursive performances—either those we are already competent to enact, or as the basis of new expressions. Articulating this in a more straightforwardly Kantian way, one might say that while our receptive capacity or our sensible, perceptual modalities are distinct from our understanding or rational capacities, both are in play in the act of perceiving or intuiting the world. While our understanding is not exercised in intuition in the same way as it is in making a judgment (e.g., it is “passive” and not self-consciously operational), it nevertheless plays a constitutive role in experience. The understanding unifies intuition in a manner that corresponds to the unity of judgments—not by making experience propositional, but by making it exhaustively amenable to discourse. The kind of unity granted by the understanding just is the kind of unity that shows up in a discursive act—such as<sup>157</sup> the expression of a judgment. This means that intuitional content can entitle moves within the space of reasons, which in turn means that experience can stand as a rational check without being reduced to a Myth.

The overly concise account McDowell gives in “Avoiding the Myth of the Given” is neither complete nor satisfactory. In particular, McDowell does not adequately describe intuitional content (i.e., having one’s surroundings in view) or the non-propositional unity it maintains. There remains an important story to tell concerning precisely how rationality is operational within perception. Nevertheless, as I argue below, his key insights

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<sup>157</sup> The unspoken but important implication here could be articulated by inserting a “but not limited to.” I will return to this point below.

concerning the conceptuality of perception are cogent enough to stand up to his nonconceptualist challengers. Additional, I will attempt to use his vagueness as a potential virtue, adopting McDowell's model of conceptuality without being trapped by his (perhaps implicit) assumptions.<sup>158</sup>

## II. Nonconceptualist challenges

Having looked at the critical shift in McDowell's position in the wake of his debate with Dreyfus and his most recent articulation of his conceptualism, we will now situate that conceptualism within the greater debate over nonconceptual content. In doing so we will examine how McDowell fares against two of his main nonconceptualist challengers.

### *McDowell's total content conceptualism*

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<sup>158</sup> To be more specific, the cogency of his Kantian insight that rationality suffuses our perceptuality in a holistic as opposed to an atomistic sense is much stronger than his specifics of how this is so (for more on the contrast between "additive" and qualitative theories of rationality see Boyle [forthcoming]). That said, it is clear, as McDowell says elsewhere and as I will discuss below, that he remains an "all but" propositionalist. I interpret this to mean that while perception is not perception *that* (e.g., <this-such is an F>), it is nonetheless unified in a manner capable of being directly articulated as a judgment (e.g., <this-such> is had in perception and can be focused on and strung together with a perceived <that-such>). At times, however, McDowell's description of intuition seems more akin to Heidegger's notion of 'circumspection,' wherein we perceive our environs in a holistic way without differentiating (i.e., "carving out") individual objects or properties. As I will discuss more below, regardless of McDowell's view on the matter, we ought to take the latter rather than the former as our guide. That is, we can understand the significance of rationality in perception—or the nature of intuition—in a sense that remains conceptual according to a discursive criterion, but which is more compatible with Dreyfus's Heideggerian insights.

As we discussed in Chapter Two, McDowell is a total content conceptualist. The nuance of his current position, however, warrants careful articulation. As we saw, there are three features on which discussions of content center: truth-valuability, being a mental phenomenon, and representational character. McDowell's notion of content is a nuanced affirmation of all three features. As we've just seen, McDowell now rejects the notion that perceptual content is propositional. Nevertheless, the kind of content that perception yields is such that it can be propositionally articulated in judgment. Experience is of the world as (at least seeming to be) a certain way—that is, experience has truth conditions—even if only indirectly, needing first to be determined as the content of a judgment. (As we will see below, however, while McDowell seems to have in mind that all of experience can be articulated so as to yield truth conditions, his position does not actually entail this. Experience is amenable to discursive articulation, but obviously not all discursive acts are truth-valuable.)

Second, perceptual content is the result (in part) of our rational capacities, but more importantly it is content available to be taken up in the space of reasons. It is exhaustively conceptual and amenable to being made the content of discursive acts. While McDowell nowhere denies the relevance of perceptual content to other aspects of human life, it is unquestionably a phenomenon that is in-principle accessible to our mental life. Importantly, however, it is often the case that the content of experience never in fact becomes the content of reflection. What's more, as we saw in the debate, certain circumstances are such that the content cannot be reflected upon (e.g., when things happen too rapidly).

Finally, perceptual content is representational. As already discussed, McDowell is a disjunctivist; he claims that perceptions are *of* the world, that our senses open us directly onto our environment. Perceptual content is *not* a matter of putting the perceiver in relation to a representation of the world but in relation to the world itself. Nonetheless, in doing so perceptual content is still representational—not in the sense of being an intermediary between us and the world, but in the sense that perception presents the world *as* being (or seeming to be) a certain way (i.e., as contentful). Perception is representational because it carries information concerning the world—though again that information is contained not in an intermediary but in the world itself *as* given in our direct experience.<sup>159</sup> Consequently, at least certain aspects of this content can be shared in thoughts, beliefs, or discursive performances.<sup>160</sup> In short, perceptual content for McDowell is content that is in-principle mental content that, while intuitional rather propositional, nonetheless contains information (including truth-conditions—though perhaps not exhaustively, and available only when made the content of a judgment) that is hence representational and (largely) shareable.

As discussed above, by ‘conceptual’ McDowell means not that perception is dependent on or characterizable in terms of the concepts that the perceiver possesses. Rather, it is conceptual in terms of its composition. Experience is a product of the operation

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<sup>159</sup> Note that this also means that perception is fallible (e.g., we can mis-perceive, hallucinate, etc.). For more on how McDowell reconciles disjunctivism with the fact of perceptual error see (2011).

<sup>160</sup> I say “certain aspects” since, as McDowell notes in a response to Brewer, the *presentness* of a perceptual content of an object cannot be had in a belief about that object with one’s eyes closed; see 2008b: 204-205. As noted in Chapter One, McDowell champions the context-dependent nature of perception and rationality. McDowell’s understanding of representation as information is also compatible with some of that information being bodily in nature and not susceptible to propositional representation.

of our conceptual capacities in conjunction with our sensible capacities. In perception these capacities are not operational in the same way they are in an explicit judgment. Rather, conceptuality suffuses our perceptual experiences in the sense that the unity of our intuitions is a function of the exercise of our conceptual capacities, just as it is in judgment. What marks perceptual experience as conceptual is the fact that it *could be* made the content of a discursive act. Consequently, perception licenses inference and can play a role in the space of reasons.

*Bermúdez's concept-possession nonconceptualist challenge*

I want to endorse this basic picture of total content conceptualism. I hope to show that this position is more than simply one of several consistent positions within the debate over nonconceptual content. Given the variety of positions and understandings of conceptuality and content, I cannot give an exhaustive comparison or discuss the relative merit of McDowellian conceptualism in contrast to all other positions. Nevertheless, I want to argue that McDowell's basic picture is not only reasonable, but that we have strong reasons to endorse it over the basic approach of some of its rivals. McDowell himself has already motivated his position with respect to its transcendental and epistemological merits. I will show that it also has the ability to resolve the conflict with Dreyfus and account for the way in which our rational capacities integrate with our perceptual and other skillful capacities in order to disclose the world. The full details of this motivation for endorsing McDowell's picture will have to wait until the next two chapters, but I will begin to show its merits on this end below.

First, however, I want to examine how McDowell's conceptualism fares in the debate with his nonconceptualist competitors. To begin, we will look at the arguments of Jose Luis Bermúdez who represents one important approach to nonconceptual content—the fact that our perceptual discriminations outstrip our conceptual repertoire. Next, we will look at the work of Robert Hanna and Monima Chadha who attempt to use McDowell's Kantianism against him, arguing for a strong version of content nonconceptualism.

Bermúdez is perhaps the most active nonconceptualist writing in the past decade.<sup>161</sup> He builds what he calls the “master argument” for the nonconceptual content of perception in support of partial content nonconceptualism and bases this argument on two principles.<sup>162</sup> First, “the content of perception is linked to capacities for perceptual discrimination.” If one cannot discriminate some feature, one cannot be said to represent that feature. Second, “concept possession can never be wholly explained in terms of capacities for perceptual discrimination—even in the case of concepts for which discriminative capacities are necessary.” This is because a minimal condition on what it means to have a concept is to understand its role in inference or its relation to other concepts, something that is not true of mere perceptual discrimination. Finally, Bermúdez's “master” claim is that a “perceiver *need not* possess concepts corresponding to everything that they are capable of perceptually discriminating, even when we confine our attention to

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<sup>161</sup> For example, see 2003, 2007, 2011, and Bermúdez and Cahen 2011.

<sup>162</sup> While Bermúdez explicitly self-identifies as a partial content nonconceptualist (see 2007), he is generally interpreted by others as a state-nonconceptualist; see Crowther (2006) and Hanna and Chadha (2009). This is because his arguments turn on whether a perceiver need possess the concepts necessary to specify the content of a perceptual discrimination. Whether he is taken to be a state- or content-nonconceptualist, his challenge to McDowell is representative of nonconceptualist challenges based on the fact that much of our perceptual experience is unconstrained by our present conceptual repertoire.

perceptual discriminations that reflect perceptual representation,” or in other words, “discriminative capacities *can* outstrip conceptual capacities.”<sup>163</sup>

If Bermúdez is right, then our perceptual capacities are able to represent features of the environment (i.e., discriminate and present them to our view) that cannot be specified by the perceiver’s present set of concepts. Since these features are in no way constrained by or dependent on the perceiver’s current conceptual repertoire, Bermúdez claims to have shown that such perceptual content is not conceptual. His arguments, however, are not compelling. To begin, there is much more to be said about his basic claims, particularly the first principle. Bermúdez treats this weak and unobjectionable claim as if it were a much stronger claim, divorcing perceptual capacities from conceptual capacities altogether, rather than merely attesting to certain conditions wherein one’s specific conceptual repertoire does not contribute to the perceptual discrimination of certain features of one’s environment.

Nevertheless, we can simply grant these claims as stated without their threatening the conceptual nature of perception—including those perceptions for which one does not currently possess the concepts needed for their specification. This is because McDowell’s conceptualism is based on our conceptual capacities and their contribution to the content of perception, not on our conceptual repertoire and the relation between the concepts we possess and contents we discriminate. Bermúdez assumes a notion of conceptuality whereby the conceptuality of a perception depends on (or at least is indicated by) one’s ability to specify the content of that perception with concepts that one already possesses.

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<sup>163</sup> 2007: 60; see 58-61 for Bermúdez’s support of these claims.

One's conceptual capacity for Bermúdez is something like one's set of concepts and one's ability to match those concepts with a content. That is, he sets up a criterion for conceptuality whereby the conceptual content of a perception demands a one-to-one correspondence between the perceptually discriminable features of one's perception and one's concepts. If one's repertoire fails to exhibit a one-to-one correspondence—that is, if “discriminative capacities *can* outstrip conceptual capacities”—then the content of one's perception is not conceptual.

What Bermúdez has shown is that there is more to perceptual content than concept deployment and that at least in certain circumstances discriminable content does not require concept deployment. But as we've already seen, that's not McDowell's notion of conceptuality at all. McDowell acknowledges that we often have perceptions for which our present stock of concepts is neither necessary nor a part of those perceptions. The criterion for conceptuality is not one-to-one correspondence, but whether the perception as it is can be made the content of a discursive act and so made available within the space of reasons (i.e., whether it is apt to linguistic or inferential articulation). The question is not whether one's concepts play a role in perception, but whether one's conceptual capacities do so.

All Bermúdez has in fact shown is that one's rational capacities are not the only thing at play in perception, that basic to and necessary for contentful perception is the contribution of our sensible capacities. No one disputes this point, however, and vis-à-vis McDowell's conceptualism it is trivially true. A similar reply can be made to all nonconceptualists who attempt to leverage a similar criterion based on the present conceptual repertoire of the perceiver. Analogously, it can serve as a response to

nonconceptualists who focus on whether a content is currently subsumed by a concept or set of concepts or otherwise related or embedded within inferential structures. The critical question is not whether a content currently *is* conceptually embedded, but whether it (as the content that it is) *can be*.<sup>164</sup>

At this point we might ask, who has the better criterion for conceptuality? If the content of our perceptions depends upon the operation of our conceptual capacities, and if those conceptual capacities endow perception with the potential for discursive or linguistic articulation, it's difficult to see why we ought to deny them conceptual status. Bermúdez fails to account for *why* perceptual discriminations for which the perceiver lacks a concept can nonetheless play an epistemologically significant role. This is another way of saying that Bermúdez does not address the difficulties involved with epistemological Givens. He likewise has no story for how one acquires the content of a perceptual discrimination as the content of a concept. According to his view, conceptual acquisition entails a transformation in the *kind* of content had. Consequently Bermúdez, in similar fashion to Dreyfus, is subject to a host of difficulties with relation to content dualism. Both Bermúdez and McDowell acknowledge that in perception we are given contents for which we lack a mastered concept. Since the actual contents of such perceptions are of a different *kind* for Bermúdez (i.e., nonconceptual) he owes us a story concerning how such content is

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<sup>164</sup> Specifically, this response is sufficient for authors such as Richard Heck (2000, 2007), Michael Tye (2006), and Adina Roskies (2008). It is similar to the claim that one can grant state-nonconceptualism (i.e., that a perceiver does not possess the concepts necessary to specify a present perception) without this fact having any bearing on whether or not the content of the perception is conceptual (see Speaks 2005). Since Bermúdez and others (e.g., Toribio 2008) argue that concept possession and state-nonconceptualism is relevant to the kind of content a perception bears, I have tried to respond to their claims directly rather than indirectly by reducing their position to state-nonconceptualism.

transformed into conceptual content. Likewise, he owes us a story for how it is that such contents can, even without being transformed into the content of a concept, come to play an epistemic role (e.g., one can imagine thinking, “Based on careful observation, I *know* that this painting has more shades of color than that one,” while lacking anything like a conceptual repertoire competent to one’s perceptual discriminations). Additionally, Bermúdez needs a story for how conceptual and nonconceptual contents interact within a single perception. One either needs a reasonable explanation for why the contents of perception and the contents at play in the space of reasons are of the same kind (which McDowell does), or one needs a reasonable explanation for how contents of a different kind interact and transform (which Bermúdez lacks).<sup>165</sup>

#### *Hanna and Chadha’s situated nonconceptualist challenge*

Hanna and Chadha pose a much more significant challenge. In addition to offering a serious nonconceptualist alternative that undermines McDowell’s conceptualism, it is directly motivated by their reading of Kant. Thus they pose a simultaneous challenge to McDowell’s reading of Kant and his conceptualist conclusions. In many ways this challenge mirrors that of Dreyfus, appealing to our embodied and situated first-personal experience—the kind that cannot be made the content of a proposition. While they agree that merely lacking an apt conceptual repertoire is not enough to pose a challenge to McDowell’s conceptualism, they believe (*pace* McDowell) that Kant’s philosophy not only argues in favor of conceptual

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<sup>165</sup> In other words, Bermúdez has what Kant calls a homogeneity problem; see his Schematism chapter in *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

perceptual content, but likewise argues in favor of a kind of perceptual content that cannot be conceptual, even in principle—a position they call ‘essentialist content Non-Conceptualism’ or simply ‘Kantian Non-Conceptualism.’ Their claim concerning essentially nonconceptual content is the following:

At least some acts or states have representational content whose semantic structure and psychological function are *necessarily distinct* from the structure and function of conceptual content.<sup>166</sup>

Thus Hanna and Chadha, quite differently than Bermúdez, set up a criterion for nonconceptual content that focuses on whether or not a given representational content can even in principle obtain a similar structure and psychological function as a conceptual content: “It has to be *impossible* to give an adequately individuating conceptual specification of an essentially non-conceptual content.”<sup>167</sup>

Their understanding of the structure and psychological function of a conceptual content is set forth in a complicated, five-part theory of concepts which they call the *Logical Cognitivist Theory of Concepts*.<sup>168</sup> Critically, this theory contains a ‘linguistic cognitivism condition’ that implies a telephone criterion of conceptual experience: “it must be possible to convey . . . conceptual content linguistically to someone else . . . over the telephone, in the absence of the individual thing or things represented by that concept.” Similarly, “no concept is such that it *cannot* be conveyed by means of *some possible natural language* to someone else who is not directly acquainted with or confronted by the individual thing or

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<sup>166</sup> 2009: 193; see also 188-189.

<sup>167</sup> 2009: 195.

<sup>168</sup> See 2008: 197-205.

things represented by that concept.”<sup>169</sup> This sets up a classical contrast between conceptual and nonconceptual content<sup>170</sup>:

*Knowledge by description, or logico-linguistically mediated thought* about the world, other minded animals, and oneself<sup>171</sup>

and,

*Knowledge by acquaintance, or immediate subjective experience* of the world, other minded animals, and oneself,

Critically, knowledge by description or conceptual knowledge “expresses an inherently context-insensitive, *allocentric* or non-egocentric (whether third-personal or impersonal), shareable, communicable content.” On the other hand, knowledge by acquaintance “expresses an inherently context-sensitive, *egocentric*, first-personal, intrinsically spatiotemporally structured content that is not ineffable, but instead shareable or communicable only to the extent that another ego or first person is in a cognitive position to be directly perceptually confronted by the same individual macroscopic material being.” In other words, conceptual content refers to information that language can express in a context-insensitive, third-personal manner while nonconceptual content refers to information that may or may not be linguistically expressible, but is necessarily context-sensitive and first-personal. The structure of such content is non-propositional, and the

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<sup>169</sup> 2008: 199-200.

<sup>170</sup> Note that this distinction mirrors Dreyfus’s understanding of the conceptual vs. nonconceptual content in his initial volley against McDowell; see Dreyfus 2005.

<sup>171</sup> 2008: 201.

psychological function is environmental and agent-reflexive location and tracking.<sup>172</sup>

Accordingly, human experience proliferates with nonconceptual content and their illustrations include the familiar examples of sensorimotor knowledge and other skillful, normative, and unreflective activities. Conspicuously, this account undermines McDowell's and others' strategy to account for the conceptuality of experiences that outstrip our conceptual repertoire via our ability to immediately bring such experiences under demonstratives, since demonstrative acts are context-dependent.

In response I will begin by pointing at what I see as an important insight contained in this theory of concepts that has direct bearing on the Dreyfus-McDowell debate—the importance of situated cognition and of any theory of content being able to account for both the context-sensitive and insensitive elements of experience and how they relate. Next, I will appeal to the work of Thomas Land in order to cast doubt on the Kantian merits of Hanna and Chadha's position. While the overall merit of their theory of (non)conceptuality by no means hangs on its fidelity to Kant, this factor is nonetheless relevant since both McDowell and Hanna and Chadha claim to be working out Kant's epistemology. More importantly, the Kantian credentials are directly relevant to McDowell's shift to Kantian intuitionism in perceptual experience. If it turns out that Kantian intuitionism cannot support a claim to total content conceptualism, then McDowell's recent and more nuanced position on conceptuality appears much weaker. Finally, I will respond to Hanna and Chadha's accusation that a McDowellian theory merely rules out any notion of nonconceptual content via a priori fiat. In doing so I will argue that McDowell's notion of conceptuality is both more plausible and motivated. This section will

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<sup>172</sup> 2008: 207-208.

serve as something like a proxy battle in Kantian terms for the basic disagreements concerning conceptuality in the Dreyfus-McDowell debate.<sup>173</sup> I intend for my arguments here to justify my election of a McDowellian version of conceptuality and prepare the reader for the following sections which examine more fully the payoffs and potential of this election.

The situated nature of human experience plays a prominent role in contemporary philosophy, cutting across numerous fields of study from phenomenology and cognitive science to language and philosophy of action. Not only is situated experience acknowledged, but its centrality and importance is such that theorists like Hanna and Chadha are legitimately able to list as a reason in favor of their theory the fact that it accounts for both situated and context-independent representations in perception. We saw Samuel Todes claim earlier that understanding exactly *how* these two aspects of human experience are related is the central problem that Kant imparts to philosophy.<sup>174</sup> As we've also seen, accounting for both the context-dependent and independent aspects of normative human experience is one of the animating features of the Dreyfus-McDowell debate and directly relevant to Dreyfus's central paradox. Consequently, I fully agree with Hanna and Chadha's claim that the situated and "unsituated" aspects of human experience must be understood as "*combinable*" in order that "perceptual judgments, perceptual knowledge, and perceptual self-knowledge, and also logical and practical reasoning about the perceivable world more generally, are to be possible," and I applaud their

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<sup>173</sup> Hanna and Chadha explicitly employ a two-level picture whereby our situated grip on the world is the foundation that makes possible the "superstructure" of the space of reasons.

<sup>174</sup> See Dreyfus (2005): 17.

acknowledgment and efforts to do so. That these variant elements of human experience are capable of seamless integration is a phenomenological fact that we must keep in view.

While I laud their championing of this insight, however, I disagree with their account—in part because I think they fail in just this respect.

I will say more on this below. First I want to discuss their reading of Kant. Hanna and Chadha claim Kant as the founder of nonconceptualism. They re-appropriate Kant's famous slogan, "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" to in fact advocate "empty" thoughts (e.g., things-in-themselves) and "blind" intuitions (e.g., someone's first encounter with a tree, not knowing what it is with which they are confronted). They hold that intuitions and concepts must be brought together (i.e., "synthesized") in valid judgments, but that the two have other roles to fulfill separately. This makes intuition a process for furnishing cognition with sensible material—material that if not synthesized with concepts, is blind or without epistemic merit—and the act of judgment as the synthesizing element of cognition that brings sensible material under concepts, resulting in an epistemically relevant product. Additionally, this makes intuition a clearing house for mythical Givenness in McDowell's sense. In a move reminiscent of Dreyfus, however, they accuse McDowell of peddling the myth of the Myth of the Given—of falsely claiming that all notions of the Given are merely causal sensory input. Instead, they claim that the intuition furnishes cognition not with mere sensory data but with spatio-temporally structured, egocentrically situated sensory input that is thus proto-rational and

normative.<sup>175</sup> This proto-rational, normative foundation is necessary for the higher-level cognitions and specifically that which gets conceptualized in the act of judgment.

What is critical to Hanna's and Chadha's Kantian nonconceptualism is the fact that the spatio-temporal structure of perceptions and our abilities to locate and track both ourselves and the objects of our environment are all a function of perception and the unity of the intuitions had in perception. In Kantian terms, the spatio-temporal unity of intuition is merely a matter of our capacity for sensation and entirely unrelated to the understanding and the unity of judgment imparted by the understanding. While our capacity to judge must make use of the proto-rational (non-pernicious) givens of the intuition—and in this sense, nonconceptual sensibility and conceptual judgments are complementary—the relationship of dependence is entirely isomorphic. Intuition has one kind of unity (spatio-temporal, egocentric unity), which is necessary for but entirely independent of the understanding and its (propositional) unity. Since all conceptual content is a product of the understanding, and situated intuition is independent of this capacity, intuition must be—essentially—nonconceptual. Consequently, rational and non-rational animals share both their proto-rational capacity of perception and the nonconceptual deliverances of that capacity, while rational animals combine these deliverances with concepts in the act of judgment.

Thomas Land claims that this basic picture is an inaccurate interpretation of Kant.<sup>176</sup> I will briefly relate three separate arguments he uses to dispute Hanna and Chadha's reading. First, Land denies the legitimacy of a proto-Fregean interpretation of the relation of intuition to judgment. Hanna and Chadha (along with various other Kantians) make

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<sup>175</sup> 2008: 209-212; this is also the main focus of Hanna (2011).

<sup>176</sup> See Land 2006, 2011, and 2012.

intuition to function as something like singular terms in Fregean judgments. Intuition supplies the particular content for the general (conceptual) predication within a judgment. Land points out that this is anachronistic—Kant was working firmly within the tradition of Aristotelian logic. More importantly, it misses Kant’s explicit claims that concepts function in the subject position of judgments. That is, judgment consists of a relation between concepts. Consequently, in order for intuition to play the subject role in judgment, it must already be conceptual, and this is incompatible with the proto-Fregean reading of Kant.<sup>177</sup>

Second, and more significantly, it is a mistake to interpret Kant as claiming that sensation, independent of the understanding, can grant intuition the sort of unity required either to locate and track objects (including oneself) or to play the epistemological role that Kant envisions. First, while Kant indeed claims space and time as pure forms of sensibility,<sup>178</sup> it is not merely the ability to perceive an object as spatio-temporally structured that constitutes the unity given in intuition. Rather, “It is the unity apparent, for instance, in the idea that distinct representations, occurring at different times, are representations of one and the same persisting object.”<sup>179</sup> In other words, the specific kind of spatio-temporal unity exhibited in intuition goes beyond what can be given within any individual perception. It requires what Land calls a sensible combination,<sup>180</sup> something that goes beyond a capacity for mere receptivity.<sup>181</sup> In Kantian terms, there is a distinction between mere sense impressions, which will necessarily exhibit a spatio-temporal structure, and the manifold of intuition. Thus, according to Kant our ability to locate and

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<sup>177</sup> See 2012.

<sup>178</sup> That is, space and time are constitutive features of all sensation and this fact is independent any particular experience; see 2011: 9.

<sup>179</sup> 2006: 204.

<sup>180</sup> See 2006: §2 and §4.

<sup>181</sup> See 2006: §3.

track objects and ourselves cannot be a product of our sensible capacity for the very reason that it is a product, a matter of synthesis between separate perceptions. The unity exhibited in intuition is a unity that can only be produced by the understanding. Hence while the pure forms of space and time belong to sensation and may be properly called pre-conceptual, the unity given in intuition that allows for spatio-temporal tracking is a matter of conceptual synthesis.<sup>182</sup>

Finally, for Kant logic (a feature of our rational capacities) is not enough to supply knowledge—knowledge requires the mind to have in view *actual* objects. Hence, the mind needs intuition as a receptive capacity to supply actual objects and play this critical epistemological role. This also allows us to determine whether our judgments are true and false according to whether those judgments correspond to what is given in intuition. This in turn means that “it must be possible for the very same object to be both an object of judgment and an object of intuition;”<sup>183</sup> that is, the objects of intuition must be capable of being cognized. According to Kant, if intuition is to play its intended epistemological role, thought and perception must be tailor-made for one another, and their correspondence cannot be an accident—the unity of intuition must be structured according to what is necessary for cognition.<sup>184</sup> This condition cannot be met if the unity possessed by intuition is granted by our sensible capacities independent of the understanding. “If one locates the source of the unity of intuition in the pure form of intuition, then there is no reason to think

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<sup>182</sup> Importantly, Land does not follow those who make all synthesis a matter of judgment. Rather, like McDowell, Land interprets Kant as positing a “two-species view of the exercise of spontaneity,” wherein the synthesis brought about in judgment is different than the synthesis brought about by the understanding in intuition (though both are conceptual; see 2006, §2). I will say more about this below.

<sup>183</sup> 2011: 12.

<sup>184</sup> 2011: 12.

that this unity is the objective unity Kant requires”—namely, the unity appropriate to thought.<sup>185</sup>

Land uses this Kantian framework to criticize Hanna and Chadha<sup>186</sup> as well as the propositionalism of McDowell’s conceptualism in *Mind and World*. Nevertheless, we can see that it works as a vindication of McDowell’s recent shift away from propositionalism. Land’s work functions as a Kantian validation of McDowell’s basic picture that our human rational faculty unifies the deliverances of perception—not by subsuming all features of perception under mastered concepts, and not by presenting perception as propositionally structured, but by unifying perceptual content in such a way that it can be thought or made the content of a judgment. Perception and judgment are able to “match up,” so to speak, because they’re forged in the same furnace—the furnace of the understanding or of our conceptual capacity.<sup>187</sup> Specifically, according to Land, the exercises of spontaneity result not merely from judgment but also from spontaneity’s synthesis of the deliverances of sensation. This is not a matter of propositionally structuring perception, which takes place in judgment; rather, it is a matter of conceptually synthesizing perceptions such that they are appropriate to cognition.

Let me here point out that while I find Land’s arguments and interpretation of Kant compelling, the case for total content conceptualism does not hang on what Robert Pippin

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<sup>185</sup> 2011: 13.

<sup>186</sup> Specifically, Land only considers the work of Robert Hanna. Nevertheless, the arguments given by Hanna and Chadha together are more specific to the considerations of this dissertation and make use of the same Kantian reading as Hanna’s individual works.

<sup>187</sup> Land is also critical of what he understands as McDowell’s claim that sensible synthesis is a kind of judgment and his use of demonstrative concepts (2011: 14-21). I think he misreads McDowell’s claim, and once again offers a McDowellian solution for problems to which McDowell (at least in his recent writings) is not subject.

has called “superfine points of Kant interpretation.”<sup>188</sup> This is particularly true given the tremendous implausibility of Land (or Hanna or anyone else) offering a definitive interpretation.<sup>189</sup> The relevance here is simply to note that McDowellian conceptualism cannot be dismissed on account of an its possessing illegitimate Kantian credentials.<sup>190</sup>

More importantly, I believe that McDowell’s epistemological insistence—that if the deliverances of perception are to play a role in the space of reasons, they must already be conceptual in nature—can stand on it’s own, regardless of how faithful it is to Kant. This is because McDowell has articulated an important worry concerning the nature of perception. Perceptions do in fact influence our reason. For a perception to do so, however, in a way that is not merely causal (i.e., “exculpatory”), it must be able to *rationally* relate to our judgments and beliefs. A commitment to nonconceptual perception, however, is, among other things, a commitment to the content of those perceptions as independent of one’s conceptual capacities and so independent of rationality as such. If intuition consisted in the deliverances of perceptual capacities that stood independent of our rational capacities, it is mysterious how perception could bare a rational (as opposed to merely causal)

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<sup>188</sup> 2013: 91.

<sup>189</sup> For a compelling example of disagreement with Land that largely supports Hanna’s interpretation of Kant, see Tolley (2013). Among other things, Tolley defends the non-conceptuality of Kantian intuition based on its singular (as opposed to general) nature. I would note, however, that in a manner analogous to state-nonconceptualism, Tolley’s Fregean interpretation of Kant (though contra Land) is compatible with McDowellian conceptualism. Likewise, even if it remains truer to Kant, in the context of the contemporary debate over nonconceptuality it suffers from the same problem’s as Hanna and Chadha vis-à-vis the plausibility of situated rationality discussed below.

<sup>190</sup> The fact that conceptualists and nonconceptualists both trace lineage to Kant is evidence of both the richness of Kant’s philosophy and the inherent complexity of the overall debate.

relationship to judgment.<sup>191</sup> Explaining this relationship is a conspicuous problem for anyone positing nonconceptual (but intelligible, normative) perceptions, regardless of how we ultimately ought to interpret Kant.

This same courtesy of divorcing the merits of McDowellian conceptualism from its faithfulness to Kantian orthodoxy must also be extended to Hanna and Chadha. Even if Land and McDowell are right, and Hanna and Chadha are working with a distinctly non-Kantian form of nonconceptualism, this isn't reason in and of itself to reject their position. There are other reasons, however, to doubt their picture of nonconceptual content—reasons that bear on McDowell's debate with Dreyfus. The main question that arises from Hanna and Chadha's position is whether we ought to maintain a classical understanding of conceptuality as situation-independent. I will now discuss why I find McDowell's arguments that our conceptual capacities are involved in situation-dependent activity are more compelling.

Hanna and Chadha argue that the classical distinction is better able to handle recent research that emphasizes the situated nature of human experience and cognition. Specifically, they claim that only nonconceptual content is suited to mediate skillful, situated, non-propositional, non-reflective activities.<sup>192</sup> Their conclusion on this point, however, is merely a restatement of the premise. They claim that our two separate activities—situated, unreflective activities versus context-independent, reflective

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<sup>191</sup> Again, Boyle (forthcoming) contains the most helpful articulation of the general difficulty faced by theories that posit rationality as something independently added to or operated upon generic animal perception, and the inherent epistemological and metaphysical dualism sustained by such theories. As I will argue in later chapters, there is also an important a phenomenological difficulty for such theories.

<sup>192</sup> 2008: 207.

activities—call for two separate kinds of content. With regard to the question of why we might not simply have different faculties or different exercises of those faculties upon the same content in different situations, their only response is that there are two separate activities—situated and “un-situated.” We need two kinds of content to mediate two kinds of human engagement *because* there are two kinds of human engagement.

There are, however, other difficulties with their position. To begin, regardless of whether McDowell or Hanna and Chadha have the better reading of Kant, it is difficult to see how claiming that the situated but nonconceptual deliverances of perception are “proto-rational” overcomes the gap between what can count as an epistemologically relevant aspect of experience and what cannot. We saw above that for McDowell, a Given is “an availability for cognition to subjects whose getting what is supposedly Given to them does not draw on capacities required for the sort of cognition in question.” Sometimes it appears to be the case that the nonconceptual, proto-rational deliverances of sensibility are for Hanna and Chadha precisely a content available for cognition with an epistemic import.<sup>193</sup> If such is the case, I do not see how they can avoid the charge of mythical Given. At other times, they specifically deny that their nonconceptual content is a thesis about phenomenal content at all, but speak instead about nonconceptual content as a condition for the possibility of rationality.<sup>194</sup> If nonconceptual content has no part in our phenomenal experience of the world, then it seems to be relegated to the sub-personal level of experience, a building block or bit of informational processing that goes into but is not a

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<sup>193</sup> For example, when they refer to Kant’s example of a tree perceived for the first time or the situation-specific content of experience. Also, it’s difficult to understand how their primary example of nonconceptual content, the spatio-temporal aspects of our experience of the world, could count as an entirely non-phenomenal part of experience.

<sup>194</sup> 2008: 196.

part of our experience of the world as such. If that is the case, then McDowell can simply accept their nonconceptual content without abandoning his conceptualism.<sup>195</sup>

Let us suppose, however, that there is some sense to their nonconceptual content that is neither a matter of epistemic given nor mere sub-personal processing and so avoids the horns of this dilemma. There seems to be much more than merely “proto-rational” normativity involved in our situated activities. This is particularly true given their claim that nonconceptual (proto-rational) content is what mediates all of our activities incapable of a general, context-independent specification. Their account seems to make a great deal of our experience and discursive activities nonconceptual. While on the one hand, this preserves the classical sense of the conceptual as general, it counter-intuitively makes nonconceptual other aspects of human activity that have been classically considered as paradigmatically conceptual—namely, activities of engaged reason and discourse. Consequently, all speech acts involving indexicals, incomplete descriptions, and other context-sensitive elements are at least “hybrid” entities, combining conceptual and nonconceptual material alike. This makes purely conceptual exercises something of a rare bird, even when limiting our consideration to indisputably reflective activities.

Again, the important consideration is whether bifurcating our reflective and linguistic activities in this way is motivated. Given the widely varying phenomena that McDowell’s and Hanna and Chadha’s respective notions of conceptuality take in, it’s helpful to review what exactly a notion of conceptuality is meant to do. While there is obviously

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<sup>195</sup> This is essentially the move that McDowell makes in discussing Daniel Dennet’s “structure of contentful events within us;” see 1994b.

some dispute here as well, there seems to be an uncontroversial overlap concerning three essential functions of an account of conceptuality:

1. Describe the contributions of rationality to human activity
2. Account for the content of reflective and linguistic activities
3. Contribute to an explanation of inference

In light of these goals for a definition of conceptuality, I think McDowell's version performs better. Particularly in a Kantian tradition that maintains an explicit link between the conceptual and the rational, it makes more sense for one's notion of conceptuality to cover all areas of rational activity—context-independent and otherwise. The right lesson to draw from the literature on the situated nature of human experience is not only that there are numerous extra-rational contributions to experience (something I will speak a great deal more on in the following chapters), but also that rationality is intimately involved in our situated experience. Rationality is involved in situation-dependent ways, just as much of our linguistic practices are contextually bound. Dreyfus is right to criticize the picture of classical rationality that reduces our non-reflective, embodied engagements to a form of implicit reflection. On the other hand, Hanna and Chadha are wrong to reduce genuinely rational and linguistic modes of situated engagement to forms of nonconceptual engagement. What's more, situation-specific information (paradigmatically, perceptions) license inference. Our notion of conceptuality ought to account for these things. Drawing a line between contextual and non-contextual activity is simply too blunt. Like McDowell, I think the evidence of rationality in situation-dependent activities means that, "we should

reject the picture of rationality as situation-independent.”<sup>196</sup> Otherwise, as Dreyfus might say, we fail to remain true to the phenomena.

Hanna and Chadha might respond by acknowledging that yes, rationality and linguistic practice can operate in situation-dependent ways, but they do so by making use of information that is *essentially* situation-dependent. Thus, as they point out, the sentence ‘I am Canadian’ is a hybrid, containing content that is materially and formally situation-dependent (i.e., the indexical ‘I’), together with a material concept and general predicate.<sup>197</sup> The point is to distinguish between the elements in situated rationality and discursive practices that can be specified third-personally and those that remain essentially indexed to the situation.

I see two problems with this response. First, in terms of conceptuality, this response fails to give us a reason why we ought to draw the line at situation-dependence. Much more relevant (again, in terms of conceptuality) is whether the content of the experience (whether context-dependent or independent) can play an inferential role. If it can, Hanna and Chadha haven’t given us a reason to call it nonconceptual. Thus, they interpret Kant’s

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<sup>196</sup> 2007a: 339. Note that McDowell’s argument for the involvement of rationality in situation-dependent activity just is the argument for conceptualism that we’ve been considering. According to McDowell, human experience is such that our rational capacities are involved at the level of perception—that human rationality structures experience in such a way as to make it available to or expressible in discursive activity and so endow experience with epistemological significance. This understanding of rationality means that rationality does not require either detachment or active reflection in order to be operative. See (2013). Additionally, McDowell interprets and endorses Aristotle’s ethics as providing us with a “form of deliberation [that] is a form into which we can cast an explanation by reasons, and such an explanation can be appropriate for actions that did not issue from prior deliberation” (1998: 23-24). In other words, intelligent, purposive human activity is appropriately articulated or explained with reasons, even when this activity involved no explicit or detached deliberation.

<sup>197</sup> 2008: 204.

phrase, “He who sees his first tree does not know what it is that he sees” as an example of paradigmatically nonconceptual perception. It’s not merely that one lacks the concept of tree when one first sees a tree, but rather that one lacks any means of third- (or im-) personally specifying *what* one sees. One can only demonstratively or ostensively indicate the tree to someone else sharing the same context. This example, however, is reminiscent of Bermúdez’s challenge above. It’s not that the content *cannot* be third-personally conveyed, but that at the time of first perceiving the tree the perceiver did not have mastery over the concept *tree*. If, however, the perceiver were to be told immediately that what she saw was a tree, she would then, without transformation in the kind of content she perceived, be equipped to convey that information over the phone.

More importantly, situation-dependent (e.g., indexical) content licenses inferences. If I doubt the existence of a blue-footed booby and while on a trip to the Galapagos a friend points to a bird and says, “There! that’s a blue-footed booby”—information that Hanna and Chadha maintain is essentially nonconceptual—I can draw the general, situation-independent inference that “There is at least one blue-footed booby.” Given the fact that this inference could not be drawn without the indexical content, it won’t work to claim that the original speech was hybrid, with the conceptual part of the speech act licensing the inference. This can be seen in the fact that one can also draw situation-dependent inferences from situation-dependent information. For instance, if my friend’s utterance was given on an unknown island the location of which I was utterly ignorant I might infer “There is at least one blue-footed booby here.”

Again, in response Hanna and Chadha could retreat to a more minimal understanding of essentially nonconceptual content. It's not the specific information at play in situation-dependent rational or discursive practices that is nonconceptual, they might say; and hence, it's not the nonconceptual content that licenses the inference. Rather, they could emphasize the spatio-temporal, egocentric information implicit in the experience as the nonconceptual content. As we've already seen, Hanna and Chadha claim this content, essentially non-propositional in nature, as a necessary ground for any rational experience at all. If one cannot maintain one's grip (or be situated in the 'Grip of the Given' as they put it), one cannot so much as experience an object. Conceptual content is parasitic on the nonconceptual, spatio-temporally unified, indexed sensations made available through the act of perception.

I can see two ways of interpreting this narrower claim as to what nonconceptual content is and why we ought to acknowledge it as nonconceptual. We might interpret Hanna and Chadha as referring to genuinely representational content that is part of the constitution of the perception or experience. Either this spatio-temporally structured content is merely part of the subpersonal perceptual processing or it's a part of personal-level experience. If the former, then it might be genuinely nonconceptual content, but of a kind that has no obvious epistemic import and does not characterize our experience as such. As McDowell has argued, nonconceptual information processing is not at odds with the conceptualist claim that experience is conceptual all the way out.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> See McDowell 1994b.

On the other hand, Hanna and Chadha could elect a narrower interpretation of personal-level, situated experience that makes possible our rational grasp of perception. This would make their claims something of a Kantian rewording of Dreyfus's phenomenological critique of McDowell's conceptualism. It would be to argue for a bottom-floor intuitional experience that provides a necessary spatio-temporal, indexed structure to all experience of the world, on the basis of which top-floor rational understanding could operate and allow things like beliefs to be meaningful. This is the most plausible way to read their claims.

This interpretation, however, exhibits exactly the same dualistic challenges as Dreyfus's position. Unlike Dreyfus, however, they fail to recognize the difficulty that positing two separate *kinds* of content in a two-story account poses. They certainly recognize that the two kinds of content must be able to operate in conjunction with one another ("essentially non-conceptual content is *combinable* with conceptual content"<sup>199</sup>). But their work lacks any discussion of how this takes place. They merely stipulate that these two *essentially* different kinds of contents copulate to generate hybrid offspring. Unlike Dreyfus, they feel no compulsion to tell a story concerning how this might take place or in what sense the ground floor content informs and holds up the second story. While I certainly agree that we need an account that allows the different aspects of our experience to be able to integrate, as I've already made clear, I don't hold out much hope that there is a satisfying way to do so from within content dualism.

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<sup>199</sup> 2008: 189.

In conclusion, while Hanna and Chadha are right to focus on the relevance of situated experience, they draw the wrong lessons from that experience. Their interpretation of Kant is at least controversial. More importantly, even if their reading of Kant is correct, they fail to tell a story concerning how sensations that are merely spatio-temporally and egocentrically structured (what they consider to be a non-pernicious form of intuitional given) can present epistemically relevant material for conceptual judgment. Likewise, they fail to tell a story of how content of one kind (nonconceptual) can provide the foundation for and seamlessly combine with content of an entirely different kind (conceptual). Not only do they recreate Dreyfus's two-story metaphor in Kantian terms, they likewise recreate his dualistic difficulty—merely stipulating rather than working out a genuine solution. Overall, I believe the right lesson to draw from our situated experience is that we need an account of rationality and language that operates seamlessly in situation-dependent and independent ways. We need an account of unified perceptual content that lends itself to our rational, discursive, and other skillful coping practices.

While there remains much to be worked out, McDowell's account has the potential to do just that. Having examined McDowell's conceptualism in the light of his contemporary nonconceptualist critics, I will work to extend his account in order to provide a resolution to the tensions of the Dreyfus-McDowell debate. The details of this account will unfold over the course of the next two chapters. First, however, we need to examine McDowell's account in light of Dreyfus's specific challenges.

### **III. Dreyfus's phenomenological challenge reexamined**

Having updated McDowell's position in light of his more recent writings and disavowal of perceptual propositionalism, we're in a position to reevaluate Dreyfus's criticisms in the debate. Specifically, I will look at four of Dreyfus's objections, dealing with each in turn. The first is a variation on the problem of the Refrigerator Light Hypothesis raised in Chapter Two: what reason do we have to suppose that appropriating some content of experience as the content of a judgment does not alter or otherwise distort that content? Second, Dreyfus aptly notes that "capacities can't pervade anything."<sup>200</sup> What does it mean for conceptual capacities to be "drawn upon" in perception without their being exercised? Third, in various ways Dreyfus levels the charge of intellectualism: McDowell is overzealous in his assumptions concerning the pervasiveness of mindedness. Fourth, the spirit of Dreyfus's charge of propositionalism doesn't simply fade in the wake of McDowell's repudiation. Specifically, McDowell gives us no hint that he doesn't remain an in-principle propositionalist, particularly with regard to our ability to articulate experience. I will argue that with regard to at least some of these objections, McDowell himself appears guilty as charged. Significantly, however, McDowell's position need not be.

McDowell's conceptualism hinges on his claim that all experience *could be* made the content of a discursive act, though much of experience never does get articulated in this way and we at least occasionally lack the concepts needed to do so. This raises a worry similar to that of the Refrigerator Light Hypothesis. As we discussed in Chapter Two, there is no more warrant for assuming something like reflective intentionality on the basis of retrospective reflection than there is in a child's assumption that the refrigerator light always stays on. Similarly, we can challenge McDowell's claim to the counterfactual

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<sup>200</sup> (2007b): 372.

articulability of experience. Making the content of an experience into the content of a discursive act might either fail to capture at least some of the content of that experience or else we might (unwittingly) transform the content of that experience in our articulation.

There are two considerations that add plausibility to this modified version of the problem of the Refrigerator Light Hypothesis. First, we're all familiar with examples where our retrospection *does* indeed fail to capture the experience as experienced. The second is the worry that the basic nature of certain normative behaviors is unreflective and so not amenable to reflective or discursive articulation. As already noted, Dreyfus is fond of examples where our experience literally happens too fast for reflection to be in play or where any degree of reflection in the experience degrades one's skillful competence, casting doubt on both the (in-principle) accessibility and aptness of the experience to reflective or discursive articulation.

The first thing to note in response is the formal adequacy of McDowell's model to this specific challenge. There is no change in the nature of the content when one "carves" out a bit of intuition in order to make it the content of a discursive act because intuitions have their unity through the operations of the same faculty that bestows unity on acts of judgment—our rational or conceptual faculty. Since both are fashioned or constituted (at least in part) by the same faculty, experience is (in-principle) amenable to articulation because the content of experience is of the same kind as the content of reflection or articulation: conceptual. This formal adequacy is by no means in tension with the practical realities of our everyday experience. Clearly we can misfire in our attempts to articulate an

experience. In fact, misfiring might even be inevitable if the nature of the event is such as to remain practically inaccessible to articulation (e.g., when it happens too fast).

The example of skill degradation is more challenging. As Dreyfus notes, there is a way in which we can experience the world directly as affordances to action, as polarized in terms of attraction and repugnance to act in certain ways. Dreyfus claims that an object's (or situation's) affording some action—say the chair's affording sitting—evaporates (or at least significantly dissipates) as a result of reflection. Thinking about the affordance of the chair or thinking of the chair *as* chair means that the chair no longer presents itself as merely available for sitting or at least that the attraction to sit lessens. “In general, paying attention to a solicitation as one responds to it leads to a regression from expertise to mere competence.”<sup>201</sup> The appropriate response to this challenge is similar to that given above. Purposive action that takes place too quickly for reflection is simply not an obstacle to the claim that human perception makes use of conceptual capacities. Likewise, the requirement of non-reflection for optimal skillful responses to affordances simply does not mean that conceptuality isn't involved. This would only be the case if McDowellian conceptualism required reflection or detachment. As we've already seen, it does not.

Dreyfus might further object that the criterion of discursive articulability isn't met by this response. If conceptuality requires an in-principle articulability, and if certain actions are too fast or involve an affordance component that degrades if articulated, then it's not clear that such activities can in fact be articulated. The claim, however, is that the content of experience is always in-principle articulable, not that one always has the ability

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<sup>201</sup> 2007b: 374.

to do so. This in-principle condition is met if the structure of the experience is conceptual in the way that McDowell claims. Furthermore, as we saw in Chapter Two, the affordance of an activity *can* be expressed in certain speech acts, such as the pragmatic uses of language the Dreyfus himself notes. That is, the affordances permeating skillful experience are not an in-principle barrier to discourse.<sup>202</sup> If McDowell is right, then neither the practical inaccessibility nor the danger of content transformation highlighted by the modified Refrigerator Light Hypothesis is significant. What remains at issue is simply whether McDowell is right that conceptual capacities themselves are at play in the act of perception, endowing personal-level experience with conceptuality and in-principle articulability.

This brings us to Dreyfus's second objection, that capacities don't pervade. Dreyfus claims that McDowell owes us a story about what it might mean that conceptual capacities are drawn upon or operative but not exercised in experience. McDowell's claim is that there is a qualitative difference—a difference at the level of content—between the descriptively similar perceptions of rational and non-rational animals. As we've already seen this is not because rational animals actively reflect or deploy concepts in reflection, nor is it the case that *what* we perceive is somehow limited or constrained by our repertoire of concepts. Rather, it is because our conceptual capacities themselves help to constitute our experience—minimally in terms of the objective unity with which these capacities structure experience. As even McDowell acknowledges, however, perceptual content does not need this sort of unity in order to facilitate differential responsiveness to our environment.<sup>203</sup> Hence there are two questions. Why ought we to think that rational

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<sup>202</sup> I will have much more to say about this in Chapters Four and Five.

<sup>203</sup> 2008: 1-2.

capacities structure perception *tout court*? And what does it mean for rational capacities to be operative but not exercised in experience?

What exactly it means for rationality to be operational in perception in a way that differs from its exercise in judgment has received sustained attention from respondents to *Mind and World*.<sup>204</sup> Dreyfus is right to push McDowell on this issue. As noted above, McDowell needs a story and has not adequately supplied one. Nevertheless, there are some things to say in his favor. McDowell's claims amount to an endorsement of the Kantian project to provide a means whereby causal impingement on our sensory apparatus can rise to the level of knowledge—his resolution of the rationalist-empiricist debate. As discussed above, Kant argued that knowledge required both the reception of our sensible capacities and the judgment of the understanding. According to Kantians in the conceptualist tradition, he argued for the correspondence of these heterogeneous capacities by claiming that there is nothing given in perception that is not unified according to certain (conceptual) constraints—intuition is synthesized by spontaneity in such a way as to be amenable to cognition. McDowell explicitly takes up this insight. There is nothing given in personal-level experience that cannot serve at least in principle as fodder for our linguistic practices.

It is of course a mystery how *any* of our perceptions serve as warrant for beliefs. As we've noted, even situated, non-reflective experience can license inference. This lends plausibility not only to the objective unity of experience—that some faculty is working to deliver sensation in an epistemically meaningful form—but also that our ability to reflect

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<sup>204</sup> For example, see Putnam (2002) and Pippin (2007).

on experience coincides with a sea change in the nature of experience for rational animals. This is what is captured in the idea of total content conceptualism. McDowell extends the Kantian insight in such a way as to make room for meaningful, unreflective activities as well as the active use of rationality in situation-dependent ways. All of experience is potentially available to thought and discourse because conceptual capacities are part of the work of presenting personal-level experience to rational agents. How exactly it does so, however, remains a mystery. While I can't presume to adequately demystify this phenomenon, I aim to say a great deal more about what is involved in the non-exercised operations of rationality in experience, clarifying some of the ways in which the mind acts not only on the contents we hold in reflection, but likewise on contents grasped in our embodied coping. Helping to elucidate this difficulty is one of the aims of Chapters Four and Five.

Next, we turn to the charge of intellectualism—that McDowell makes mindedness too pervasive a phenomenon in human experience. There are three specific ways in which he is said to do so. First, he is hasty in his acknowledgement of embodied coping skills, almost dismissive in his claim to be able to account for them, and makes no effort to explore the nature of our embodied experience. His focus has been and remains on the self-conscious, epistemically relevant aspects of experience. Importantly, during the course of his debate with Dreyfus he seems to fail to grasp the phenomenon of world-disclosure altogether and certainly does not account for the way in which our coping skills facilitate this disclosure. Next, he follows Kant in maintaining the presence of a robust, first-personal ego in all experience. Finally, there is still a question, despite his significant shift, of how

committed to propositionalism McDowell remains. I will consider each of these charges separately.

It is true that McDowell spends little time investigating the embodied nature of human experience or the contributions of skillful coping to meaningful human experience. As he says in the debate, “I do not have to ignore embodied coping; I have to hold that, in mature human beings, embodied coping is permeated with mindedness. And that is exactly what I do hold.”<sup>205</sup> Beyond reaffirming his epistemological arguments in favor of total content conceptualism, however, McDowell spends no time exploring the experience of skillful coping. The charge that McDowell is dismissive of skillful coping is hardly relevant, however, if what is meant amounts to no more than that McDowell fails to be an existential phenomenologist or philosopher of embodied skill or intentionality. What *is* relevant is if McDowell is dismissive of philosophical insights that are directly pertinent to his own work. This is the case that Dreyfus tries to make—it’s not merely that McDowell is dismissive of the insights of existential phenomenology, but that those insights have direct bearing on the issue of conceptuality. While Dreyfus does not attack McDowell within the framework of the contemporary debate over nonconceptual content, we saw in Chapter Two that his approach and criticisms can nonetheless be made from within that framework. The failure of conceptualism is a failure to account for our normative, embodied grasp of and skillful engagement with the world. The inadequacy of McDowell’s account is only emphasized by his ad hoc discussion of unreflective skilled exercises as the deployment of “practical concepts.”<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> 2007a: 339.

<sup>206</sup> See McDowell 2007b: 367-368.

Directly related is the charge that McDowell fails to grasp let alone take seriously the phenomenon of world-disclosure. Dreyfus tries to make the case that the meaningfulness and normativity of perception is not simply a matter of objective unity or the availability and bearing of facts or what is the case to our rational capacities for judgment. Rather, experience discloses “a web of attractions and repulsions” and “[non-propositionally structured] solicitations to act,”<sup>207</sup> the totality of which Dreyfus calls a ‘world’ (as we saw in Chapter Two). Dreyfus sees the meaningfulness of propositional judgments and the epistemically relevant deliverances of perception as partially constituted by and so dependent on this prior disclosure of normative relevance to embodied action. If he is right, then skillful coping and its attendant world-disclosure undergird McDowell’s epistemological picture. If Dreyfus is right, then failing to recognize or give credence to embodied normativity in the wake of Dreyfus’s discussion is philosophically culpable and strengthens the charge of intellectualism.

The primary consideration then, is first whether Dreyfus is right about world-disclosure and second whether the normative contributions of skillful action can be accommodated by McDowellian conceptualism. I want to give a nuanced yes in answer to both. Dreyfus’s picture of unreflective embodied coping and the web of attractions and repulsions that this coping makes available is epistemologically relevant and significantly enriches our understanding of human experience. I also want to affirm his claim that this phenomenon elucidates a practical normativity that would not otherwise be accounted for—a normativity that, though practical, is on display in rational activities. As Dreyfus might note, the skillful coach advising the athlete to specific action refers to and manifests

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<sup>207</sup> 2007a: 357.

an embodied understanding of the specific and particular environment in which they both act. It is on the basis of a skillful, embodied grasp on the world that a coach is able to be appropriately attuned to the relevant features of, say, a baseball game, and so able to deliberate and express helpful advice. Our skilful interactions work both to discriminate and prioritize the salience of the environment within which the game is played. Such examples not only highlight the skillful, bodily understanding of athletes, however, but likewise the seamless way in which this understanding interfaces with both situation-dependent rational exercises and language. Obviously the normative relevance of skillful coping extends well beyond sports.<sup>208</sup>

Nevertheless, while there might be a chronological or evolutionary story to tell about embodied skillful coping making available a world and thus facilitating our higher-order reflective and linguistic capacities, this is not the way things work in everyday experience. Just as McDowell stated, he need not deny either the phenomenon or the contributions of embodied coping; he need only make plausible the claim that there is no ontological gap separating such coping and our rational and linguistic practices in experience. The plausibility and cogency of his conceptualist epistemology helps to motivate this claim, but on its own is insufficient to stave off the charge of intellectualism. We need a much more detailed framework for understanding how this takes place and what exactly the nature of mindedness is in coping activities.

The third charge of intellectualism concerns McDowell's Kantian insistence on the necessary presence of the ego in personal-level experience—that of an "I do" if not an "I

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<sup>208</sup> I will have much more to say on this in the final chapters.

think.” Here again, I think McDowell guilty—though once again, I find absolution possible through nuance.<sup>209</sup> Dreyfus need not resort to extreme examples of highly complex, highly skilled activities or the testimony of star athletes. Our everyday experiences of absorbed activity—kneading bread, weeding the garden, reading philosophy—are enough to support his claim that a self-conscious ego is not attendant “in the flow.”<sup>210</sup> Rather, as Heidegger notes, what is attendant is the ubiquitous experience of *mineness*.<sup>211</sup> We own our experiences as *ours*. (Dreyfus also acknowledges this fact, noting that coping is always mine in the sense that I can always break off from it and that coping is always a directed activity.<sup>212</sup>) Retrospectively, we never fail to claim ownership of those experiences (i.e., recognize that the point of view from which they were experienced was precisely *my* point of view), not because there was an (even implicit) ego attendant, but rather because experience as such is a fundamentally individuating phenomenon that concretely situates the agent and out of which the possibility of an ego arises. We sometimes speak of an “out of body experience” or of melding with the situation—but such *situations* are always *situated*. They are individuating and we do not doubt that they are *ours* and that who *we* are is intimately tied up in the perspectival having of experience. To doubt whether or not an experience is ours or whether we were the agent involved is a symptom of either severe

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<sup>209</sup> McDowell backs off from his strong criterion of self-consciousness in his recap of the debate, claiming that the “I do” implicit in experience is not the experience of an ego, but rather is meant to serve as an adjective, marking out the *kind* of experience had even while “in the flow.” See (2013), especially 45-46.

<sup>210</sup> I do not mean to imply that Dreyfus fails to appeal to everyday experience. For example, he has made much of Sartre’s example of chasing after the streetcar; see (2007b) and Dreyfus and Kelly (2007).

<sup>211</sup> See 1962: §9. While Heidegger there discusses the phenomenon of “mineness” on what he calls an ontological level, he would likewise recognize the ontic-level manifestation of mineness being discussed here.

<sup>212</sup> 2007b: 375.

breakdown (e.g., some form of psychosis) or that the “experience” was not experience as such, that is, not a personal-level, agential event (e.g., when one is lulled into a hypnotic daze while driving drowsily).<sup>213</sup> To claim that a self-conscious ego is ubiquitous in experience is an unwarranted, intellectualist claim. To acknowledge the mineness of experience is to stay true to the phenomena.

Finally we need to consider the charge that McDowell remains a propositionalist, even in the wake of his disavowal of perceptual propositionalism. We saw above that McDowell links the conceptuality of intuition not to the propositionality of intuition (which he now denies), but to the potential of intuitional content to be carved out and made the content of discursive acts. To this point, I’ve let the issue remain ambiguous as to how liberal McDowell’s understanding of ‘discursive act’ actually is. If, in fact, McDowell is a linguistic propositionalist—that is, if he privileges propositional discourse as the primary unit of meaningful speech or reduces the meaningfulness of linguistic activity to its ability to be accounted for in propositional discourse—then his shift from perceptual propositionalism to intuitionism is a minor shift indeed. There is reason to suspect that McDowell understands his shift in just such a minimalist way. While he emphasizes the critical nature of language, it is always in terms of language’s ability to assert judgments

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<sup>213</sup> I do not want to flatten experience or claim that other possibilities do not exist. For example, there seem to be experiences we have not so much as individual agents but as somehow part of a collective (two very different examples might be purported experiences of Buddhist enlightenment and experiences of mob psychology). While there is undoubtedly more to say about such experiences, I think my basic claim holds: either these experiences are experienced as *mine* in the sense of serving to partially individuate and constitute the agent as agent, or they are not experienced as an agential event.

and instantiate a tradition's norms for what licenses what.<sup>214</sup> Furthermore, in the same volume in which he disavows perceptual propositionalism in favor of intuitionism, he states that nevertheless, "intuitional content is still content. And it is, we can say, all but propositional. One arrives at propositional content by simply articulating what are already elements of intuitional content."<sup>215</sup> This does not seem in any way to divorce McDowell's notion of concepts from propositions. It appears that he remains committed to both the propositional nature of language and the appropriateness of all experience to propositional discourse.

Importantly, however, McDowell need not take this stance. The above quote is perfectly compatible with the claim that while propositional discourse can indeed articulate aspects of intuitional content, it cannot articulate *all* of intuition, because intuition itself is not exhaustively propositional or amenable to propositional discourse. It doesn't seem a large step from noting, as McDowell does, that certain experiences are inappropriate to certain forms of articulation,<sup>216</sup> to noting that, in a similar vein, there might be certain aspects of experience that resist propositional articulation because they are simply not amenable to such. This is perfectly compatible with his claim that "we should centre our idea of the conceptual on the content of discursive activity"—it is merely

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<sup>214</sup> "The feature of language that really matters is rather this: that a natural language, the sort of language into which human beings are first initiated, serves as a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what" (1994: 126). Nevertheless, it is perhaps most plausible to read McDowell as agnostic on this point, with the hints at such a bias being merely the product of his focus on elucidating the space of reasons and the relation between perception and judgment.

<sup>215</sup> 2008b: 200.

<sup>216</sup> For example, he notes that the *presentness* in an occurrent perception (e.g., of a red cube in the room) cannot be captured in content of a belief with one's eyes closed (e.g., that there is a red cube in the room). The perceptual experience of presentness is not appropriate to a decontextualized content; see 2008b 204-205.

to deny that discourse is exhausted by propositional expression. Propositional assertions become one vehicle for articulating the conceptual content of intuition, which can just as comfortably be articulated by other, irreducibly non-propositional speech acts.

In summary, McDowell often does reveal his intellectualist tendencies. In emphasizing the ability of the intellect to be engaged in embodied practice, he neglects the contributions of embodiment to intellectual activities. Nevertheless, his overall approach, emphasizing human practical engagement as an activity pervaded with mindedness, has a richer potential than he seems to recognize. As I have already hinted at and will later work to show, his epistemology is perfectly compatible with a substantive phenomenological enrichment. Experience can remain individuating and essentially *mine* without insisting on its being first-personal in the sense of being structured by an even implicit “I think.” Perhaps most importantly, having tied conceptualism to discourse gives his conceptualism the potential to account for non-propositional aspects of experience. This fact will be the focus of my concluding remarks.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

In addition to broadening the scope of the conceptual, centering our idea of the conceptual in the discursive—once the idea of the discursive is divorced from the propositional—likewise has the benefit of being far more phenomenologically plausible. I have argued that Dreyfus’s yeoman’s labor in painstakingly *describing* experience in a way that remains true to the experience does not succeed as a reason to doubt the conceptuality of experience. As we saw in Chapter Two, his own convictions concerning the incompatibility of

conceptualism and coping is in part because of his assumption that conceptualism entails the exhaustively propositional nature of experience. This assumption is unfounded. He is surely right, however, in pointing out the implausibility of the exhaustively propositional nature of experience in the face of phenomenological evidence to the contrary. We can, however, adopt McDowell's claim from the debate that *all* the content of experience "is suitable to constitute contents of conceptual capacities," because all the content of experience is, at least in principle, suitable for being "made to be the meaning of a linguistic expression,"<sup>217</sup> without restricting 'the meaning of a linguistic expression' to the meaning of a proposition.

Additionally, centering the conceptual on the discursive helps to bring to light an often overlooked or quickly dismissed fact: in everyday speaking and reasoning, non-propositional premises license propositional inferences. When my wife asks me if I moved her book, I appropriately infer that the book is no longer on her nightstand.<sup>218</sup> We regularly make inferences from (and to) non-propositional thoughts or speech acts and do so without propositionally mediating the inferential moves<sup>219</sup> (e.g., embedding my wife's question within a propositional syllogism in order to infer the absence of the book from the nightstand). While we *can* do so, we usually do not. We can expand the scope of the conceptual beyond the propositional without shrinking the juridical scope of the

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<sup>217</sup> 2007a: 347-348.

<sup>218</sup> I'm assuming in this scenario that there is no indirect speech act involved, that the question is genuine and not (or not also), say, an accusation. The ambiguity that can arise or the flexibility that exists in appropriately grasping the meaning of a discursive act, however, only lends credence to my point.

<sup>219</sup> It may be the case that we can only make such inferences in the wake of our holding numerous propositional beliefs and becoming skillful negotiators of the propositional realms of the space of reasons. This developmental question, however, is orthogonal to the question of whether mature rational animals in fact make propositionally mixed inferences.

perceptual world; we can do so by expanding the set of what kinds of discursive entities can license inferences within the space of reasons.<sup>220</sup> Expanding our notion of the kind of content had in experience (i.e., beyond the merely propositional) and expanding our notion of what can license what (i.e., beyond the Davidsonian notion that only a belief can license another belief) are both a matter of bringing our theoretical account more in line with our phenomenological reality.<sup>221</sup> Importantly, these phenomenological gains do not incur epistemological losses. McDowell's core project of working out how perceptions justify beliefs remains fully intact.

I have tried to show how both Dreyfus and McDowell have suffered from their respective propositional presumptions. In the course of their debate, both maintained an assumption concerning the connection of the conceptual and the propositional. While McDowell has repudiated his propositionalism with respect to perception, he nevertheless remains something of an "all but" propositionalist. That is, he still appears to maintain that all experience is such that it can, in principle, be made into the content of a proposition, and he likewise makes no move to disavow his linguistic propositionalism. Dreyfus, on the other hand, while acknowledging the rich and pragmatic roll that language plays in our lives, shies away from allowing language a role in structurally articulating the world, thus maintaining a dualism in language that parallels his dualism in experience.

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<sup>220</sup> See Rebecca Kukla and Mark Lance (2009) 57-59, 66-78 for an excellent discussion of non-propositional inference that is largely sympathetic to McDowell's position. Mark Lance has also argued that we commonly evaluate possible actions and make perfectly good practical inferences without the involvement of an entailment relation (2010 Asilomar Conference talk, unpublished). My own views are directly influenced by their work, and I take them to be largely in accord.

<sup>221</sup> I expand on this point in Chapter Six.

Nevertheless, in these last two chapters, we have seen that Dreyfus and McDowell's respective presumptions and their attendant strictures are superfluous. McDowell's crucial move in his more recent writings opens up the space for a more constructive dialogue between the two and an overall more satisfying philosophical position. Perceptual experience is intuitional and not propositional. It is unified and singular in a sense that propositional articulation—which narrows in on and carves out some aspect of intuition—cannot be. This recent claim shares important similarities with Dreyfus's own account of conceptually narrowing in on an aspect of one's holistic perception or grasp of a situation in coping.<sup>222</sup>

McDowell, however, avoids an ontological gap between the intuitional perception and discursive articulation. Both are conceptual. Because our conceptual capacities are involved in the production of perceptual content, intuition is such that it could be, in-principle, made to be the content of a discursive act without a transformation at the level of content. Conceptual content is *not* a matter of placing an intermediary (e.g., a representation) between the perceiver and the world; rather, it is a matter of perceiving the world in a specific way, of having the significances of the world structurally articulated in such a way that those significances or the information<sup>223</sup> contained in the perception could be made the content of a discursive act. Conceptual content is discursive content, and meaningful speech or expressive acts, whether propositional or otherwise, are conceptual.

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<sup>222</sup> See (1991) 199-214. Dreyfus is not the only Heideggerian with an account that seems to foreshadow McDowell's recent shift. Taylor Carman's interpretation of Heidegger's "fore-structure" can be read as expressing something very similar McDowell's own account. See (2003): 212-220.

<sup>223</sup> It should go without saying that by 'information' I do not mean propositional information. Such information might be propositionally articulable, but it need not be.

Just as our visual modality grants us a visual access to the world, so our conceptual “modality” or the involvement of our conceptual capacities within our perceptual modalities grants an access to the world such that it can be discursively articulated.

Dreyfus on the other hand, has done much to elucidate the way in which our skillful coping normatively articulates the world. This normative attunement and practical meaningfulness is always manifest in the ways that we think of and express the world. What’s more, practices like thinking and speaking take place against the backdrop of our maintaining a practical grip on the world. Additionally, Dreyfus already acknowledges that discursive acts do more than simply assert things with a truth-value. Language is also used practically in various ways. Consequently, I argued in Chapter Two that Dreyfus’s account would be more consistent if he maintained that language, along with non-linguistic forms of skillful coping, works to structurally articulate the world.<sup>224</sup> We need a phenomenology of language that highlights its contributions to world-disclosure.

At this point, we can take the insights coaxed out of their respective positions and form a more comprehensive understanding of the way that language and skillful coping mutually shape one another and work to disclose an intelligible world. Specifically, language and skillful coping ought to be seen as collaborators in granting us access to the world and structuring that access in such a way that it is both practically and discursively meaningful and available to be taken up in human practices. If language is properly integrated with our other skillful capacities, then even when acting purely “in the flow” we can make sense of what it means for our conceptual capacities to be operative without

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<sup>224</sup> As alluded to, I also believe that this claim is more phenomenologically defensible, and will try to make this case in the next chapter.

concepts being deployed in experience. What's more, practical language of the sort Dreyfus acknowledges would then be conceptual, not simply because they technically remain a discursive act, but also because they either articulate or serve as a part of skillful experience that is itself genuinely conceptual. Likewise, if language is rich enough to express the non-propositional aspects of experience revealed by careful phenomenology, then we can make sense of the claim that all experience is in principle grist for our linguistic mill. We can make sense of these conceptualist claims and at the same time undermine the objection that non-propositional experience must be transformed by such articulation. We can make sense of the notion that while obviously similar and based on similar perceptual modalities, human and animal perception are different in kind. Finally, we can understand language—and conceptuality—as an embodied and not a detached mental phenomenon. The details of such an account and its bearing on Dreyfus-McDowell debate is the focus of the next two chapters.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### LANGUAGE AND PRACTICAL ENGAGEMENT:

#### AN INTIMATE DANCE

#### PART I

“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”  
-Hubert L. Dreyfus<sup>225</sup>

There is a way of giving our attention to the data of a problem in geometry without trying to find the solution or to the words of a Latin or Greek text without trying to arrive at the meaning, a way of waiting, when we are writing, for the right word to come of itself at the end of our pen, while we merely reject all inadequate words.  
-Simone Weil<sup>226</sup>

Our exploration of Dreyfus’s and McDowell’s respective arguments have put us in a position to see how the insights of both can be appropriated and developed. That is, we’re now in position to overcome the perplexing dualism that Dreyfus feels consigned to, and do so in a way that makes use of rather than dismisses his phenomenological insights. If I am right, then the debate between these two ought to be seen less as a genuine debate than a necessary dialectic that highlights the heuristic tensions and complimentary insights each has to share. Toward making that case, this chapter will first review the dualism created by Dreyfus’s commitments and elaborate its problematic nature and his proposed solution. Next, I will sketch my solution to this problem, as presaged in the previous chapters. The rest of this and most of the next chapter is then dedicated to supporting and clarifying this position with a complementary series of arguments aimed at revealing the inextricably

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<sup>225</sup> 2007b: 372.

<sup>226</sup> 2009: 63.

linked nature of our conceptual capacities and skillful dispositions—a link that fundamentally changes the nature of each. The arguments in this chapter supporting my embodied conceptualism are largely phenomenological, and are aimed at showing first that language and its semantic meaning is an intimate part of our everyday coping practices, and second, the related claim that the features of everyday coping highlighted by Dreyfus are very much at work in our typical linguistic activities.

### **I. The difficulties of Dreyfus’s dualism(s)**

In Chapters One and Two we looked in detail at two commitments maintained by Dreyfus in the debate that create a dualistic tension—what I have called his Nonconceptual Coping and Detachment Theses. While Dreyfus sees our coping and reflective experiences as related—he claims that detached reflection is parasitically derived from embodied coping—how they relate, and even more importantly how they *can* relate, is a puzzle. The sticking point is the strong ontological gap that Dreyfus poses between the content experienced in reflection and the nature of experience in skillful coping. As we saw in Chapter Two, this dualism in praxis is not just manifest in the deliverances of perception but also manifests in practical versus predicatory forms of language. Dreyfus’s dualism is a pervasive phenomenon.

Dreyfus is committed, however, to a sort of content alchemy, to the transmutation of certain aspects of the stable, meaningful world disclosed in practical coping into a world of isolable facts and features apt to explicit reflection and propositional expression.<sup>227</sup> The

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<sup>227</sup> “Existential phenomenologists need to spell out in much greater detail how conceptuality arises on the basis of being-in-the-world” (2013: 31); see also his concluding notes in 2007a and 2007b.

main difficulty is of course the same difficulty that exists with all dualisms in human experience—namely, of explaining how two ontologically distinct things are not only able to be unified as a conglomerate within a single experience, but more importantly how the propositional content of explicit reflection and judgment (or language) is derivable from the nonconceptual world of embodied coping.

Dreyfus is committed to the existence of such an account on transcendental grounds. As we saw in Chapter Two, he argues that the very possibility of our reflecting on a world of isolable facts and propositional structures requires the prior disclosure of a world intelligibly organized in terms of our skillful practices. It is only in the wake of a practical grasp on our environment, with the stability and salient order that such a grasp provides, that we can reflect on things *as* an object of such and such a kind. What's more, Dreyfus claims that careful phenomenology reveals skillful coping as pervasive and self-sufficient, while detached reflection is merely intermittent and dependent. Therefore, Dreyfus insists, since the world of facts requires the prior disclosure of the world of skillful coping, there must be an account of how our practical world is transformed into our reflective world.

I will argue that this transcendental argument fails—not because Dreyfus is wrong that the world is most fundamentally disclosed to us in terms of our relation to it in skillful coping. I find Dreyfus's phenomenological account of all explicit activity within the space of reasons as taking place against the background of skillful coping to be quite convincing. Rather, as already hinted, I believe that he misunderstands what exactly this entails. Before spelling this out more clearly, however, it will be helpful to first look at Dreyfus's attempt to sketch an account of purported content transformation.

Dreyfus's best attempt to explain content transformation—from practical to propositional—is a development of Heidegger's phenomenological account of varying degrees of disruption in coping activity.<sup>228</sup> Dreyfus claims that a careful observation of disruption in our practices reveals a gradual changeover from absorbed coping with transparent equipment to a breakdown confrontation with obstinate objects that requires a reflective ego in order to take stock of and adjust the situation so as to allow re-immersion into mindless coping. While he acknowledges "all this is very sketchy and needs to be spelled out in detail," he nonetheless finds this general approach promising, seeing it as evidence of precisely some such transformation taking place.<sup>229</sup>

This approach is unconvincing for three reasons. First, the transition as described is phenomenologically inadequate (I will return to this point below). Second, if we are in fact at our best when absorbed in mindless coping, if such coping is the ideal of human skillful interaction with the environment, then it's not clear why mindedness need arise at all. In what sense does one's existence "as a thinking, acting, self-aware subject distinct from its world" improve upon the ideal of mindless and absorbed skillful coping? Dreyfus's answer seems to be that a detached, reflective approach to the world allows us to remove certain obstacles, for the sake of returning to a state of mindless, absorbed coping. The underlying metaphor is something like the existence of a sleeping ego, gradually awakened by the obstinacy of failed coping, but eager to slip back to sleep as soon as the obstacles are removed. Thus Dreyfus's account of reflective and linguistic activity makes it purely

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<sup>228</sup> See Heidegger (1962): §16.

<sup>229</sup> 2013: 31; see also (1991): 70-79.

instrumental.<sup>230</sup> Such an account, however, is itself phenomenologically implausible. One need not subscribe to Aristotle's claim that pure theoretical reflection is the noblest of virtues in order to recognize that reflection and language—the practices of the non-absorbed human—are nonetheless virtues in and of themselves. At the least, it's clear that humans engage in these practices regularly and precisely *not* for the task of facilitating re-absorption. It's difficult to imagine Dreyfus undertaking the arduous, reflective task of debating McDowell as a means of facilitating a non-reflective absorption.

Finally, and most importantly, it is implausible that a disruptive gradualism as such can bridge the ontological gap that Dreyfus posits. Rather, disruption seems to do just that—namely, disrupt my coping, break the flow of the specific activity in which I am engaged. Dreyfus never makes clear, however, why such disruption would thrust me into a world of reflection, rather than into an alternate and fully engaged activity. When my hammer breaks, why wouldn't I go from absorbed coping in the activity of hammering to absorbed coping in the activity of fixing the hammer or finding a replacement?<sup>231</sup> Doing so seems a more plausible possibility than the possibility of undergoing an ontological paradigm shift, experiencing both myself and the world as something utterly different than but somehow still related to what it was. In saying this, I want to be clear that it's not gradualism as such that I find implausible—quite the opposite. I'm convinced of a kind of gradualism in our shifts from one stance on things to another, and find Heidegger's

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<sup>230</sup> I do not think that this is Dreyfus's considered view. Much as we saw in Chapter Two with language, I think that Dreyfus's strategic approach in the debate is such that it commits him to underplaying the richness of reflection and language in our lives. Nevertheless, as with language, the lack of a phenomenology of overt reasoning is an oversight that weakens his overall position.

<sup>231</sup> This is similar to William Blattner's criticism in (1995) which focuses on the kind of object that shows up in breakdown scenarios.

description and Dreyfus's development of the various stages of disruption an apt and helpful account. However, it is much more plausible that this gradualism manifests a continuity in the nature of our experiences, revealing in our actions a fundamental integration of the various ways in which we approach and connect with our environment.<sup>232</sup> As related, however, Dreyfus's gradualism not only fails to bridge his dualism, but likewise creates the need to bridge the intermediate steps he posits along the way.

This, of course, is less a convincing argument and more an expression of the general skepticism I have for a resolution to the tensions in Dreyfus's commitments if we leave his dualism intact. There is an irony here given Dreyfus's own radical anti-Cartesianism and distrust of dualism.<sup>233</sup> Similarly, Dreyfus began to leverage versions of the frame problem against classical AI as early as 1965.<sup>234</sup> His oft-repeated refrain has been that once the world is interpreted as a collection of de-contextualized facts, stripped of relevance and meaning, it's already too late to reclaim a world of inherent relevance, already organized in terms of our bodies, interests, and goals. My distrust of Dreyfus's dualism takes a parallel form: if we start with a world utterly foreign to conceptuality or the ways in which the world can be expressed or taken up in inferential activity, we're doomed to never finding a

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<sup>232</sup> I will return to this point below. As we will see, my account does not eliminate the need for an account of transition from one sort of activity to another; rather, it relieves us of the burden of explaining such transitions in terms of an ontological shift. More than mere tinkering with a philosophical puzzle, I hope to show that my claim to a fundamental continuity in experience is also more phenomenologically plausible.

<sup>233</sup> See (1991) Chapter 6. Dreyfus endorses Heidegger's claim that once we bifurcate the world into subjects standing over against objects, it's too late to ever get them back together. Being-in-the-world as an account of the way in which humans are always already embedded in a world of practical meaning is meant specifically as an antidote to the weaknesses of the Cartesian account.

<sup>234</sup> See (1965).

way back to it. I don't see a way to go from Dreyfus's ground floor of nonconceptual coping to the ontologically separate upper floors of conceptual reflection and language.<sup>235</sup>

Beyond my attempt above to motivate this skepticism, I do not have anything decisive to say against the possibility of an experiential dualism. As we saw in Chapter Two, however, certain key assumptions that Dreyfus makes—specifically about the possibility of language playing a role in world-disclosure—were, within his own theoretical account, superfluous. Additionally, I have a plausible alternative. If my phenomenologically sensitive conceptualism is correct, then not only will we have an attractive alternative that avoids the difficulties of Dreyfus's dualism, we will also have an alternative that embodies its virtues. A variation of McDowellian conceptualism, then, will be preferable not because the substance of Dreyfus's phenomenology is wrong, but precisely because it allows us to reconcile and so maintain the phenomena underlying Dreyfus's Nonconceptual Coping and Detachment Theses—something that Dreyfus's dualistic account fails to do.

## **II. The resolution: language as a fundamental, integrated capacity**

The alternative to Dreyfus's dualism is to posit, as McDowell does, that human experience “is pervasively bodily, but of a distinctively rational kind.”<sup>236</sup> As we saw in Chapter Three, however, the specifics of this slogan need to be carefully worked out so as to avoid the challenges posed by nonconceptualists, including Dreyfus. I also want to show that this

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<sup>235</sup> My analogy here is only meant as an analogy. I do not mean to imply that Dreyfus's compartmentalized dualism of experience is the same as Descartes' stronger dualism of human being. Nevertheless, Dreyfus is clear that he believes we have two ontologically distinct, though derivatively connected forms of experience, which allow for two ontologically distinct modes of objective disclosure. See especially (1991) Chapter Four.

<sup>236</sup> 2007b: 370.

conceptualist position is complementary rather than merely orthogonal<sup>237</sup> to the concerns of Dreyfus's phenomenology. Doing so reveals a much broader picture of human engagement with the world than McDowell's more narrow focus on justification.

As McDowell notes, experience is amenable to the space of reasons because it comes to us in a form that is already amenable to discursive articulation, and this is because experience is a function of the operations of our conceptual capacities in perception. As Dreyfus argues, however, our ability to discriminate features of a stable environment in such a way that we can express them requires a prior and continuously operational background disclosure, brought about through our skillful engagement. The key to bringing these together is to understand language as one of our skillful capacities, integrated with our other skillful capacities and operating within an intentional arc or feedback loop in order to continuously fine tune our grasp on the world. That is, *humans have a distinctively integrated domain of intelligibility, co-constituted by our various skillful modes of access to and interaction with our environment, including language.*

Vis-à-vis Dreyfus's Nonconceptual Coping Thesis, this means first that skillful coping plays exactly the role that Dreyfus claims it to play. Second, it means that because of the role language plays in world-disclosure, skillful coping is pervasively conceptual. Moreover, this claim allows us to make sense of what it means for conceptuality to be pervasively operational in human experience—conceptuality changes the intelligibility of the deliverances of our senses in the same fashion as our skillful dispositions.

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<sup>237</sup> McDowell's latest word is that Dreyfus's concerns are merely orthogonal to his own; see (2013). Given the potential of Dreyfus's phenomenology to greatly enrich the epistemological picture McDowell offers, I find McDowell's reaction too dismissive. Saying why this is so is part of the work of this chapter.

With regard to Dreyfus's Detachment Thesis, this claim means that while detached rationality and propositional structures are a distinct part of human experience, they should not be mistaken as paradigmatic of our rational engagement with the world. Rationality is engaged in irreducibly situated experience, and while certain aspects of such experience are amenable to propositional discourse, other elements are irreducibly non-propositional. Making sense of their conceptuality requires us to recognize the non-propositional nature of important parts of language.

McDowell, then, is right to claim both the exhaustively conceptual nature of experience (properly understood), and the amenability of that experience to discursive activity. Dreyfus, on the other hand, is correct to claim background coping as a condition of the possibility of conceptual activity and the irreducibly non-propositional nature of certain aspects of human (agential) experience. The rest of this section is dedicated to clarifying and spelling out more explicitly what these claims entail. I will then turn to defending them.

### *Conceptual coping*

To begin, we need to review the phenomenon of skillful coping that is the focus of Dreyfus's phenomenology. Dreyfus identifies an unreflective, intentional experience of the world that I—following his lead—have called motor intentional content. As we saw in Chapter Two, however, while Dreyfus uses the word 'content' he is not speaking of content as conventionally discussed in the literature. Motor intentional content as Dreyfus understands it is our perceptual experience of direct solicitations to act skillfully according to the affordances of our environment—that is, the way in which our bodies are

unreflectively attracted to or repulsed by the possibilities for normatively appropriate action within a given situation. Unlike normal content, motor intentional experience is not truth-valuable, amenable to direct reflection, or representational. Rather, it is a direct, embodied engagement with our actual environment (as opposed to a representation of that environment) according to a multivalent and particular (as opposed to binary and general) axis of improvement conditions (as opposed to truth or satisfaction). Consequently, such experience is not (exhaustively) amenable to propositional articulation. Nevertheless, this mode of engagement is intentional in the sense of being bodily directed toward our environment according to a (practical) normative understanding.

We've also seen that key to understanding motor intentional content is what Dreyfus—following Merleau-Ponty—calls our intentional arc (or feedback loop). Skillful coping leads us to get an ever more refined “grip” on our situation. That is, our past engagements in some activity literally affect our sensitivity to our circumstances, leading us to make finer and finer distinctions *within* perception and to cope with the environment in an increasingly optimal manner vis-à-vis the teleological structure of that activity. The skillful driver perceives and experiences the world (or her phenomenal field) while driving differently than does the novice driver, because past experience has attuned her perceptions of the environment and polarized her sensitivity to be drawn toward appropriate driving actions far beyond the experience of the mere novice.

I agree with Dreyfus's basic claims here. Motor intentional content operating within an intentional arc is a genuine, basic and pervasive aspect of our skillful, normative engagement with the environment. While we can talk about this phenomenon (as we're doing here), what is important about motor intentional content—the direct solicitations to

act in normatively appropriate ways and optimize our situation—is non-propositional.

However, I further claim that this unreflective and non-propositional mode of engagement is conceptual in the McDowellian sense worked out in Chapter Three. That is, rather than serving as a counterexample, motor intentional content like all agential perception is conceptual in the following sense:

1. The perceptual unity of motor intentional content is in part a function of our conceptual capacities; that is, our conceptual capacities (and specifically, language) play a constitutive role in structuring our (even unreflective) perception of the world.
2. Motor intentional content—specifically perceptual affordance experienced *as* affordance—is amenable to linguistic articulation.
3. Motor intentional content is normatively responsive to reasons and likewise licenses moves within the space of reasons.

I will discuss each of these in turn.

First, in the same way that our perceptual modalities are integrated, making perception pervasively synesthetic,<sup>238</sup> so too language as a mode of access to things informs our modalities and structures the way in which experience—including unreflective experience—is present. While undoubtedly an analytic possibility, we do not simply see *visual* stimuli.<sup>239</sup> Rather, the deliverances of vision are enriched by and structured

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<sup>238</sup> The synesthetic nature of perception is an important theme in Merleau-Ponty (1958). As he notes, “Synesthetic perception is the rule” (266). The genuinely synesthetic or multi-modal nature of perception is largely neglected in contemporary philosophy of perception. See Matthew Nudds (2001) for a notable exception.

<sup>239</sup> “The constancy hypothesis, which allows to each stimulus one sensation and one only, is progressively less verifiable as natural perception is approached” (Merleau-Ponty, 1958: 265).

according to the functions of our other modalities. We see the rough, gritty texture of asphalt; we see the within-reach of the coffee mug; we see the delectable taste of the dish pictured in the restaurant menu. While vision is a separate modality (analytically<sup>240</sup> and physiologically<sup>241</sup>) from, say, our tactile or proprioceptive modalities, the experience of visual stimuli is what it is in terms of its integration with these other modalities.

If I am correct about the analogous integration of language, then there is a holistic change that occurs on account of our being linguistic animals. While the analogy of the synesthetic nature of our perceptual modalities is helpful, however, it is not an exact analogy given the apparently asymmetrical nature of that integration. Thus, for example, while it is true that I do not simply see without seeing depth and texture, it is not as clear that my sense of smell is similarly pervasive a feature of sight. Nor would it be correct to say that sight is a pervasive feature of the way in which I can taste. Asking how a given texture smells might be a category mistake. This isn't true with language. Rather, language is simply superfluous to certain normative activities we undertake, and often times we never do develop ways of talking about or getting at important experiences. Again, this isn't true of perceptual modalities. It's another category mistake to claim that smelling is superfluous to feeling. Language might well be the most pervasively integrated capacity

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<sup>240</sup> Nevertheless, spelling out the analytic distinctions between and so explaining how exactly to count the sense modalities has proven a devilishly difficult problem in philosophy of perception. See Nudds (2004).

<sup>241</sup> In saying that our visual modality is physiologically distinct from our other perceptual modalities, I mean simply that our visual organs and neural pathways are distinct from, for example, our taste organs and neural pathways. I do not mean to imply either that the visual system shares none of its equipment with other modalities or that there is no sharing of neural information between modalities in a manner critical to visual operations. Rather, I take the complexities and "sharing" involved in the physiology of our sense modalities as suggestive of the intimate and synesthetic connection in our perceptual experience that I am drawing attention to.

constituting our phenomenal field, even if a linguistic grasp of or contribution to a scenario is sometimes absent or superfluous.<sup>242</sup>

Nevertheless, each modality changes the nature of the information that can be conveyed via any other modality. It is perhaps more helpful to consider the pervasive nature of our skillful dispositions. As phenomenologists like Dreyfus note, a practical understanding of possible action is a pervasive aspect of perception. As I understand it, this is in large part what it means for our experience to *afford* something (even if the affordance is only some way of adjusting our perceptual modalities so as to more optimally perceive our surroundings). Similarly, language pervasively informs our perception, disclosing a world wherein features, norms, and practical affordances are in-principle amenable to articulation.<sup>243</sup> Skillful dispositions and language likewise effect a change in one another. I can say more because of my skillful dispositions, in part because my perception is different (e.g., more sensitively attuned) on account of these dispositions. Since they change my access to the world, and perception delivers a content that can be expressed, I can say more and differently on account of my skillful dispositions. As we will discuss below, the scope of that with which we can skillfully cope likewise expands on account of our conceptual capacities.

Because the very nature of the intelligibility of human experience is structured in terms of our ability to take it up discursively, it is appropriately identified as conceptual. This is true of all experience, including our unreflective and practical engagements. This is

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<sup>242</sup> Multi-modality and the integration of language within our perceptual field is a complex subject demanding a much lengthier treatment than what can be given here.

<sup>243</sup> The way in which we perceive the action of others as a form of normative communication is just as important a feature of our linguistic capacities as is our ability to express ourselves. I will not, however, go into that here.

one reason why, as McDowell puts it, despite there being a descriptive similarity between the comportment of the human and the cat walking through a doorway, the content—including the motor-intentional content—is different. Consequently, if some content of experience—whatever kind of content it is—is such that it can be made explicit in discursive activity, then it is appropriate to claim the nature of that content to be conceptual. This is of course just as true of Dreyfus's motor intentional content as it is of other, more traditional notions of content (e.g., truth-valuable content). I will argue below that since motor intentional content can be linguistically expressed, without changing the bodily nature of that content, it is in that sense conceptual.

In answering the question of how our conceptual capacities are *actualized* without being *active* in perception and experience it is easy to misunderstand the nature of the influence that rationality exerts. One might understand capacity in a strict sense, that there are literally distinct (perhaps physically distinct) mechanisms (e.g., neurological operations) at work. It is commonly thought that some of these capacity-mechanisms supply perceptual information, and that these same capacity-mechanisms are shared by various human and non-human animals. We might then take humans as possessing a distinct capacity-mechanism to monitor or reflect on or discuss what perception makes available. This model makes it confusing to understand in what sense our distinctly rational or conceptual capacity-mechanism could be involved in supplying perceptual information that is never taken up in conceptual practices of any kind. It seems to me that this is precisely Dreyfus's confusion. Rather than answering this question, my point here is to deny the basic picture of separate capacity-mechanisms. Rather, my claim is that acquiring language changes the very nature of our perceptual modalities. We do not perceive in the

same sense as other animals on account of our having language; rather, we perceive in a manner that what we perceive is in principle amenable to be taken up in language and play a role in the space of reasons. That is, the nature of perceptual intelligibility is different. This is how we ought to understand what it means for conceptual capacities to be actualized (operational or drawn upon) in perception.<sup>244</sup>

Finally, motor-intentional content is conceptual not simply because it can be taken up in discursive activity, but also because it is responsive to the rules and norms of rational criticism. I will argue that our ability to grasp and follow rules or be responsive to reasons changes the nature of our motor-intentional experiences, for example, by allowing them to be rule-governed without our needing to reflect on or intend the rule itself. Explicit, rational rules, reasons, or challenges are themselves operative within the intentional arc of motor intentionality. Additionally, our ability to operate skillfully in absorbed coping lends itself to inferential activity. Specifically, motor intentional experience licenses inference. Hence our skillful coping with the world is wholly integrated within the framework of our rationality. Perception is informed by our conceptual capacities such that the world disclosed in skillful coping and our coping activities themselves are both amenable and responsive to conceptual and discursive activity, and coping likewise plays a direct role in the space of reasons. That is, skillful coping is conceptual.

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<sup>244</sup> As I alluded to in Chapter Three, this is also how I think it best to interpret McDowell, though McDowell is not always clear and his language lends itself to the confusion. See Boyle (2012) and (forthcoming) for a helpful discussion tying McDowell into the tradition of rationality arising with Aristotle. In addition to stipulating this as the correct way to interpret McDowell, my arguments concerning the operation of language within the intentional arc of world disclosure is meant to significantly clarify the phenomenon of conceptual perception; see Chapter Five.

### *Embodied and engaged rationality*

So far, I have claimed that a careful phenomenology and analysis of skillful coping reveals it to be pervasively conceptual—unified by our conceptual capacities, amenable to discursive activity, and functioning within the space of reasons in the sense of both licensing inference and being directly responsive to rational engagement. Conversely, we need to discuss the nature of rationality.

In their most recent exchange, McDowell reduces Dreyfus's worries to his assumption of the "myth of the mind as detached."<sup>245</sup> It's not clear that this is in fact Dreyfus's considered view of rationality. Nevertheless, detached rationality is the focus of Dreyfus's work in the debate in large part because it is precisely this form of rationality and the propositional content that accompanies it that is at odds with his account of skillful coping. Detached rationality and propositional content is what stands on one side of his dualistic gap. Rather than trying to bridge this gap Dreyfus needs to reframe his understanding of it as a dualistic gap altogether, by first recognizing the conceptual nature of coping, but second by recognizing the situation-specific nature of rationality. Additionally, both Dreyfus and McDowell need to recognize that the space of reasons contains more than merely propositional objects.

This claim is already implicit in what has been said above. More specifically, however, I will argue that detachment, while possible, is not the paradigmatic state of mental activity; a phenomenology of rational experience not only reveals it to be part of our engaged experience of the world, but also that our reflective grasp of the world in detachment is dependent on rationality's situation-dependent operations. Reflection and

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<sup>245</sup> This is also the title of McDowell's essay; see (2013).

language are shot through with indexical, situation-dependent features. This is not because experience is inextricably (and bafflingly) heterogeneous, a mysterious conglomerate. Rather, it's a manifestation of the fact that our field of intelligibility, which includes how things are able to intelligibly show up in detached reflection, is co-constituted by our skillful capacities for perception, action, and expression, all operating continuously within an intentional arc. Hence, while it might be appropriate to consider reflective and unreflective activities as analytic poles, it would be inappropriate to conclude that either phenomenon is experienced in a "pure" sense or to fail to recognize them as running along a spectrum of continuity. Seen in this light, Dreyfus's dualism is dissolved, but in such a way that his basic phenomenological commitments are redeemed rather than dismissed.

These claims will be further clarified over the course of this and the subsequent chapter. By way of summary, however, it will be helpful to distinguish my conceptualism from a stronger version. Given the above, one might assume a form of linguistic or conceptual determinism, where conceptuality creates both a boundary and a medium within which experience of any stripe is contained and might be expressed. This is not my position. Conceptuality does not limit experience. Rather, conceptual capacities are an active part of what unifies experience and constitutes the human domain of intelligibility wherein we are able to experience and make sense of experience. Conceptuality enriches the nature of experience just as does our perceptual modalities and skillful coping. This does not mean that experience is such as to be already appropriate to our current conceptual repertoire or linguistic competence. It does mean that we are (actively) receptive of experience in such a way that our experience is different than it would be were we non-linguistic animals. We can in principle take it up in our linguistic practices, even if

that means developing new ways of expressing. And no matter how unreflective our experience, it is (if it is genuinely agential experience) symbiotically related to our rational practices in the ways mentioned above.

### **III. Language and motor intentional content**

The account above of experience is both phenomenologically apparent and constitutively necessary; that is, not only is it more true to everyday experience but also experience couldn't be what it is without its being conceptual. I mentioned briefly in Chapter One that Dreyfus and McDowell both share a commitment to getting the phenomenology of lived experience right.<sup>246</sup> As Dreyfus notes, “the job of the phenomenologist is to get clear concerning the phenomena that need to be explained.” A distorted understanding of the nature of human experience will inevitably lead to a distorted account concerning that experience, and visa versa. Despite Dreyfus's commitment to phenomenology and the impressive manner in which he has put it to use, his dualism arises in part from a distorted phenomenology of conceptual activity (especially language) and the role it plays in skillful coping. As we will see below, a careful phenomenology of language and its role in coping practices is enough to establish the conceptuality of much of our experience—including motor intentionality. Beyond this, the structural features of experience described by phenomenologists depend on our conceptual capacities. Given Dreyfus's commitments to phenomenology, this is significant, both in terms of refuting his argument that motor intentional content is a counterexample to even situated forms of conceptuality, and also in terms of supporting my conceptualist claims described above.

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<sup>246</sup> For discussion of this point see Rietveld (2010).

While the position I take up here is compatible with McDowell's claims, the phenomenology pushes us away from the propositionalism toward which he inclines. It is also a significant development of his exiguous discussion of language in *Mind and World*, showing that the fundamental meaning of certain forms of language is not only situated, but also irreducibly non-propositional. Human experience, while not propositional, is indeed conceptual—responsive to reason and amenable to discursive practices—all the way out.

As we've seen, in order to make his case, Dreyfus insists on the existence of a gap between conceptual practices like language and skillful coping. A careful phenomenology reveals that while in certain examples there clearly does exist a gap, it's not a dualistic one. In many instances language and skillful coping work in an integrated fashion. I will make use of two different kinds of experience to make this clear. In the first, we see that language, far from being either a hindrance to or parasitic on our coping, can help to reinforce our experience of operating in flow. What's more, in such cases language is not used merely pragmatically, as one might use an item of equipment. Rather, as we will see, in order to function as it does to reinforce our ability to cope in the flow, such language is dependent on its semantic content (as opposed to the immediate contextual relevance of the speech act). The second case shows that the opposite is also true. Not only do we make use of language in our absorbed coping practices, but likewise, we cope in an absorbed manner with (again, semantic uses of) language.

First, consider a game of soccer with the right-forward, in the flow, attempting to maneuver the ball toward the penalty box. We can imagine the perspective of the forward as Dreyfus might describe it, with the forward's phenomenal field consisting of a rapidly

fluctuating field of forces.<sup>247</sup> Focusing on the movements of the left-back and the shifting lanes of attack available, the forward might be unaware of an approaching center-back. Imagine the center-forward, however, likewise operating in the flow and becoming aware of the danger that the center-back poses to her attacking teammate. She will naturally feel drawn to alert the right-forward and so calls out a verbal warning.

At this point, I need to distinguish between two ways in which such a warning might operate in the context of the right-forward's attack. (These ways are meant to mark out a spectrum rather than a dichotomy of possibilities.) First, imagine the center-forward saying "Look out!" This could create something like what Dreyfus might term a breakdown scenario, disrupting to some degree the right-forward's flow and causing her to look around. In this situation the actual words used have minimal significance (shouting "hey!" or even making an inarticulate noise might do; the words themselves serve as a kind of signal, like the waving of one's hands). What matters is that the verbal expression breaks the flow of the right-forward's attack, allowing her the chance to become aware of and so cope with the threat posed by the center-back, perhaps breaking off the attack and passing to a teammate. The warning here fulfills a pragmatic function by disrupting the forward's flow and does so in a general manner, without specifying exactly what the danger is and perhaps motivating the forward to reflect more broadly on her circumstances.

The center-forward's warning might, however, play a very different function. Rather than bringing about a breakdown in coping activity, the warning might actually reinforce

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<sup>247</sup> Dreyfus follows Merleau-Ponty in his use of the phrase "field of forces" to describe the way our phenomenal field consists not as a determinate layout of features or facts, but rather as web of teleologically polarized affordances. The reference is to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of a football (i.e., soccer) match. See Dreyfus (2013) and Merleau-Ponty (2008): 168-169.

the attacking forward's flow. Here the warning enters the forward's awareness in the same way that catching a glimpse or hearing the approach of the center-back might—it is merely another fluctuation within the ever-shifting field of possibilities, drawing the forward to act accordingly in order to complete the new gestalt created by the addition of the center-back.<sup>248</sup> More important for our present purposes, we can imagine all of this while ascribing a determinate and beneficial significance to the actual expression used by the assisting center-forward. Imagine her yelling something like “Coming from your right!” Here the speech-act is analogous to glimpsing the color of the approaching player's jersey. The specific color is itself the critical feature of the perception, though it's not experienced abstractly *as* a color but as a determinate, practical indication of the nature of the approach. The color, indicating an opposing player, is pragmatically experienced and responded to as a threat. The phrase shouted by the forward's teammate is similarly experienced in a pragmatic fashion, indicating an approaching threat from the forward's right side and shifting the field of forces accordingly.

In this sense, the speech-act is paradigmatic of the purely practical uses of language that Dreyfus acknowledges—it displays something for both teammates, coordinating their joint coping activity.<sup>249</sup> As noted, in this instance it reinforces the attacking forward's ability to remain in the flow. Critically, however, it is able to do so *only* because it is significantly more fine-grained and specific a speech-act than the warning in our first example. In this second case it matters what was said in the same way that the specific

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<sup>248</sup> Dreyfus discusses games like tennis as being played entirely within the flow while consisting of an ever shifting field of repulsion and attraction in (1999). See also (2002). I'm envisioning the expert forward in this example as potentially capable of dealing with the new variable of the approaching center-back as a mere shift in the overall field of forces.

<sup>249</sup> (1991): 209-211; see also the discussion in Chapter Two.

color of a glimpsed jersey matters. An inarticulate noise or waving of the hands could not communicate the specificity of the speech-act. While the speech-act played an entirely pragmatic function—reinforcing rather than disrupting the forward’s flow—it could only play that function on account of the specific meaning that the phrase would have for any relevantly competent<sup>250</sup> member of the forward’s language community. That is, not only are there certain scenarios wherein language functions pragmatically (i.e., displays) and in so doing reinforces flow, but these scenarios are dependent on the more-than-pragmatic meaning of the speech-act in question. Likewise, in certain scenarios, the potency with which a speech-act is able to reinforce a skillful coper’s ability to remain in flow is correlated to the specificity of the semantic information communicated.

To highlight this consider a second example, that of communication between drivers and spotters in high-speed auto racing, such as NASCAR. The racing conditions demand exactly the kind of fully absorbed sensitivity that Dreyfus likes to call attention to. Not only are conditions in constant flux, but the demands and also the risks of the sport require a highly developed skillful attunement on the part of the driver who must be able to fluidly respond to a host of subtle changes.<sup>251</sup> Two-way radio communication became a feature of high-speed auto racing in the 1970s, and during the 1980s the new role of *spotter* was developed. Spotters sit in an elevated position that affords a bird’s-eye view of the race in order to serve as an external guide for the racer. The need for spotters has become critical given the nature of the safety equipment that severely restricts the driver’s visual capacity.

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<sup>250</sup> By ‘relevantly competent’ I mean any member of the forward’s language community with an adequate background understanding of the situation—for example, other players, coaches, fans, certain members of the philosophical world who might read this, etc.

<sup>251</sup> Dreyfus is fond of driving examples. This particular scenario is also very similar to his example of Israeli air force pilots.

The intense nature of racing and the integral role that spotters now play means that drivers and spotters develop a close rapport and capacity to communicate with one another. On the one hand, unnecessary or unfamiliar chatter will distract and degrade a driver's performance. On the other hand, lacking a spotter a driver would simply be unable to cope with the complexities of the race with anything like the expertise of a well-trained driver-spotter team.<sup>252</sup> While drivers and spotters tend to develop key phrases and to a degree their own jargon, the volatile nature of changing conditions also demands spontaneous forms of communication. Quite literally, the driver must learn to be just as tuned-in to the barrage of messages from his spotter as he is to the other conditions of the race. A driver's ability to react immediately to the affordance created by a spotter's call of "a hole's opening left" or "debris down at the bottom!"<sup>253</sup> will dictate how successfully the driver is able to compete and avoid the hazards inherent to the sport.

Here it is perhaps even clearer than in our soccer example that not only does the driver skillfully cope with language and the affordances it creates just as he copes with the affordances presented by the cars and track, but also that the semantic meaning of the language is critical to its ability to function pragmatically within the situation. That is, the meaning that the linguistic expressions possess for competent members of the language community (e.g., non-absorbed observers) is a necessary element in the expression's ability

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<sup>252</sup> Snippets of the in-car radio of a given team are now a common feature of televised races and are available in full online, allowing spectators an "inside" glimpse of the driver's experience. Listening in, it is easy to see that without the constant stream of dialogue, drivers could not succeed.

<sup>253</sup> One might reply that statements like "debris at the bottom!" actually function by initiating a breakdown. In certain cases this might be true. But avoiding debris on the track is an integral, not an occasional or marginal aspect of racing. One must develop the skill to perceive, track, and avoid—that is, cope with—debris as fluidly as one copes with, say, the other vehicles.

to function pragmatically.<sup>254</sup> In this example the stakes are also higher since the driver's ability to respond fluidly to the spotter's communications can be a matter of life and death and almost always determine whether the driver will even finish the race.

Once we recognize the possibility for linguistically-involved fluid coping, the examples abound in which experts use language in order to coordinate complex activities and reinforce flow. Orchestra members responding to the verbal directions of the conductor during rehearsal is a prime example. While such verbalized directions are rare in performance, the linguistic expressions repeated in rehearsal continue to play an indirect role. In fact, the movements and expressions of the conductor during performance are often an intentional, anaphoric reference to the language used in rehearsal, and function to coordinate and direct the musician's activities in a way that would otherwise be impossible. In addition we might consider electricians, carpenters, waiters, Wall Street floor traders, lovers, Green Berets or any other domain of jointly coordinated, complex skillful activity wherein language plays a crucial role.

Furthermore, this seems to be a key difference between the way in which humans and animals respond to verbal cues. While a dog can be trained to respond expertly to the calls of a shepherd, the words used do not play their role in virtue of the semantic meaning those words and phrases possess for the language community. In examples such as those cited above, the human experience of the word is the difference between mere sign and semantic expression. Once again, the point is that a careful description of our coping experience reveals that language can reinforce our ability to act in flow, and that its ability

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<sup>254</sup> It is also worth noting that what I am here calling the semantic meaning of the spotter-driver communication is also pragmatic in the sense of its being situation-dependent. That is, the relevant expressions could not have the semantic meaning they do outside of their pragmatic functioning within a given context.

to do so can depend on or be made more efficacious on account of the semantic meaning of the words used.<sup>255</sup>

Significantly, this means that there cannot be anything like an ontological gap between practical and other forms of language as Dreyfus wants to maintain. This is because the ontological gap he argues for is dependent on a necessary epistemological gap between the ways in which we practically understand and linguistically communicate the world. The above examples are of skillful coping activities that seamlessly integrate practical activities with semantically contentful uses of language. This could not be the case if there were an ontological difference between the kind of understanding manifest in practical versus linguistic activity (even if there existed a clean separation between separate domains of human activity—which the above examples show there is not).

We saw in Chapter Two that Dreyfus acknowledged purely practical (non-propositional) forms of language, and I suggested that his account would be more consistent and phenomenologically plausible if he were to recognize that such language can play a role in world-disclosure. While this recognition is helpful in moving him closer to a resolution—noting that language need not be radically separate from skillful coping and world-disclosure—it failed to complete that resolution by leaving a dualism in language itself that precisely mirrored his dualism in practice more generally. Here, however, we can see that in addition to recognizing language's ability to operate in our skillful coping practices, its ability to do so is at least sometimes dependent on the connection between practical uses of language and the typical, non-contextual meanings that are a part of such

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<sup>255</sup> This is not to claim, however, that the semantic or inferential role of the speech acts in question is independent of their pragmatic use. As noted earlier, while I am sympathetic with those who argue that semantics cannot be shaved off from the pragmatic or contextual nature of language, these debates are orthogonal to my claims here.

expressions. Moreover, the copier's ability to masterfully respond to such expressions is a manifestation of the grasp she has on the meanings of these expressions in other contexts. Skillfully coping with practical language in these examples is also a conceptual exercise because the practical efficacy of the speech acts is inseparably connected with one's semantic grasp. All of this is to say that there is an unavoidable relationship and continuity between practical and other linguistic acts, not a dualism. This is of course not to say that we do not engage in relevantly distinct sorts of activities or that we cannot attend to different features of an object in different activities (e.g., unreflectively and pragmatically acting on the affordances of an object within an activity versus reflecting on its perceptual features); only that the character of our domain of intelligibility and what that makes possible is unified across these various activities.

More needs to be said about this continuity. There are in fact two very different things going on in the flow-reinforcing speech-acts we've been considering. To see this consider a casual, perhaps bored spectator listening in on the race who hears in real time the spotter's warning, "debris down at the bottom!" Such an observer will hear in this expression the semantic meaning of the phrase and be able to infer that the driver is coming up on debris and needs to adjust his trajectory in order to miss it. That is, the spectator will grasp what we typically note as the conceptual meaning of the phrase and the appropriate inferences it licenses within the space of reasons.<sup>256</sup> In our example this

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<sup>256</sup> Note that this does not always need to be the case. I do not mean to argue that there are no examples of jointly coordinated coping wherein the meaning of the agents' speech acts are disconnected from the appropriate inferences of a spectator. My argument simply depends on the existence of examples where there *is* a necessary correspondence between the agents' discourse and the conceptual understanding of this discourse had by external spectators. Likewise, I do not mean to claim that a spectator's conceptual grasp is not to some degree dependent on the practical understanding and background familiarity that the

form of conceptual and inferential grasp of the phrase was entirely absent from the driver's experience. Instead, the driver experienced the acoustic blast sounding inside his helmet *as* a practical solicitation to take the necessary actions to move higher on the track and thus avoid the debris. Nevertheless, as we saw, his ability to experience the spotter's speech-act as a solicitation is dependent on his conceptual understanding, and it is thus an example of a conceptual exercise—albeit one of a different nature than the exercise of the spectator. This is the crucial point. It is not something new to consider one and the same speech-act as in fact multiply ambiguous or genuinely playing more than one role or to consider the way in which the meaning of an expression can shift dependent on context, even for the same individual.<sup>257</sup> Nor is it something new to recognize that an expression can hold a situation-specific meaning that cannot be generalized (at least without recourse to the situation in which the expression was uttered).<sup>258</sup> It is, however, something new to recognize that a given speech act's ambiguity consists in its ability to play the situation-dependent role of an existential solicitation to act as well as carrying a meaning independent of that solicitation.

Additionally, while a situation-dependent, "propositional" speech-act like "There is debris at the bottom' can function pragmatically—literally, communicating a practical affordance to the driver—it does not do so *as* a proposition. While I have argued that in some cases the efficacy of an utterance to function as a solicitation depends on the

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spectator has of the practical activity being observed. There are obviously various ways in which one can be a spectator, and I believe that there are certain phenomena and understandings that are only accessible to what we might call a *skilled* spectator. It is a common experience (one with which I am quite familiar!) for "novice" spectators to completely miss the significance of both the actions and the speech acts of the skillfully coping participants.

<sup>257</sup> For example, I might appropriately appreciate someone's backhanded compliment when I hear it, only to determine later, in another context, the genuinely insulting nature of it.

<sup>258</sup> This is, in fact, a point that McDowell notes throughout his work.

semantic content of the utterance, this does not mean that the skillful copers' experiential uptake and response to the utterance as a solicitation is the same as, for example, that of the spectator. The solicitation to maneuver the car higher on the track is not something that is true or false. It is not even something with determinate satisfaction conditions since the solicitation might be acted on by the driver in any number of appropriate ways in order to improve or optimize the driver's grip on the race. Pragmatically speaking, it is not a proposition at all. Rather, it is a finely grained communication that makes conspicuous the existence of sub-optimal conditions along with what Dreyfus might call an existential tension calling for a resolution. In this sense, the solicitation carried in the phrase 'There is debris at the bottom' is more like an imperative<sup>259</sup> (e.g., 'Avoid the debris!').<sup>260</sup> Other, non-propositionally structured speech acts (imperatives, interrogatives, evocatives, expletives, ungrammatical expressions, etc.) likewise play a pragmatic role in the midst of everyday skillful coping. While the semantic meaning of these phrases is sometimes critical to their pragmatic function, the nature of their function as practical solicitation is irreducible to that meaning. Thus even speech-acts with propositional meaning function in irreducibly non-propositional ways in order to communicate an affordance.<sup>261</sup> That is, while one

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<sup>259</sup> I assume along with Belnap (1990) that imperatives are irreducibly non-propositional, though again, I do not think anything critical hangs on this assumption.

<sup>260</sup> I think that such situations are significantly more complex than this, though my point is not to flesh out that complexity. Note, however, that the agency involved in a skilled spotter-driver team at its best is phenomenologically more unified than coordinated, even if there remain two separate perspectives on the race. The spotter linguistically steers the driver analogously to how one might steer a remote-control car, and the driver responds to the speech acts of the spotter very similarly to the way in which he responds to other perceptual cues.

<sup>261</sup> Such examples are paradigmatic of the integrated nature of language and skillful coping. Not only can semantic meaning be taken up pragmatically, but likewise practical activity can be expressively meaningful. Again, this is not to concede that the speech acts in my examples are in fact propositional. As noted, the normative function of the above examples

cannot *assert* an affordance, one's assertion can nevertheless express an affordance, and this might be the sole reason for one's expression.

To further explore the connection between language and coping consider a contrasting example to those given above: square dancing. Here one has a caller that improvises a routine for couples dancing, based on a set of familiar and coordinated dance movements. Sometimes the caller will issue an uninterrupted stream of verbal directions in a rhythmic tone known as "patter" or "hash calls." Skilled couples learn to respond fluidly to the calls as they come against the backdrop of the music that coordinates their movements. The calls, while linguistic in nature, are unlike the uses of language above and function more like signals or cues. There is a set repertoire of calls, usually between ten and thirty, with each call functioning as a name for the movement. One can imagine different forms of calls such as numbers, whistles, or light changes, which could be used to serve the same purpose.<sup>262</sup> The racing spotter's use of "Careful, small piece of trash on your grill" does not allow for such substitution.

While one can imagine a clever driver-spotter team that did develop a system of signals to stand in for this and a host of other commonly used phrases, the spotter's communications would still remain different from those of the caller in two important

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are more like imperatives than declaratives, though I'm uneasy reducing linguistic affordances to any specific linguistic categories. A more careful and thorough analysis is needed.

<sup>262</sup> I think, however, that there is a significant difference between linguistic calls and, say, a whistle substitute—at least in terms of how these are usually experienced in human practice. This fact is brought out in the way in which a skillful caller can play with the calls, wittily fitting them in to other phrases or rhymes during the dance. Likewise, names usually hold a different significance for us than do mere signals. Despite these differences, however, the above example is meant to point out the way in which the pragmatic function of the calls could be served by other forms of signaling in a way that the linguistic expressions of a spotter could not.

ways. First, as discussed above, the variable nature of the conditions and possibilities at play in racing are simply too diverse—spontaneous linguistic communication is critical. One might be skeptical of this claim, however. While in principle the set of conditions and possibilities involved in racing might be variable and diverse, in actual fact there is a significant regularity to races and conditions communicated by the spotter. One might claim that the conditions and phrases communicated between a spotter and driver in-flow are relatively small and correspond more closely to those of square dancing, or at least that the difference between the two is a matter of degree. I disagree. Nevertheless, my point isn't dependent on whether this qualitative difference actually exists between calling and spotting. It is easy to imagine other examples of skillful coping that incorporate variable conditions and speech acts that *do* approach infinity.<sup>263</sup> Conversation and the skillful normativity involved is perhaps the paradigmatic example.<sup>264</sup> Here we have a complex practice with which we're all familiar, and in which we can either remain in- or fall out-of flow, and where the variations, though practically (and culturally) bounded, approach infinity. This is a complicated example, and there is much more to say about the ways in which discourse is comparable to the motor-intentional practices that Dreyfus highlights.

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<sup>263</sup> Imagine a form of racing where the general skills of a good NASCAR driver are the ones demanded, but where additionally the conditions and obstacles involved in the race are different at each race – where a driver literally never knows exactly what sort of things might be thrown into play.

<sup>264</sup> Taylor Carman discusses the norms that must be skillfully and unreflectively negotiated in order to fluidly engage in conversation, though he argues that these norms and our grasp of them is nonconceptual; see (2013) and (2003) Chapter Five. I believe that our ability to make these norms explicit, or at least explicitly point to and linguistically help novices perceive and more skillfully respond to these norms shows them to be conceptual. Conversation strikes me as the paradigmatic example of a practice that seamlessly incorporates our practical and conceptual understanding in a way that reveals both to be skillful, embodied phenomena that do not sit on opposite sides of an epistemic or ontological chasm. More will be said about this below.

My only point here is to make use of conversation as an embodied and coordinated skill that requires one to respond in-flow to speech acts whose variation approaches infinity.

Second, signals developed as a substitute for common phrases used by the spotter would nonetheless remain functionally parasitic on or semantically equivalent to the phrases themselves. That is, their meaning would remain constitutively connected to the original phrases, even if the driver became so skilled as to never need to *think* of the original phrases.<sup>265</sup> The same is not true of the calls issued in a square dance where practical significance need not in any sense be tied to semantic meaning, even originally. Again, one might object that it is not the semantic meaning of the phrases used by the spotter on which the success of the race depends. Rather, one might posit that the successful coordination rests on the driver's physical skill at maneuvering the racecar through various obstacles and the spotter's skill at recognizing and ostending those approaching obstacles. I certainly do not mean to deny that the speech acts in question are constitutively dependent on the spotter-driver team's background and motor-intentional familiarity with racing or on the degree to which they are contextually attuned to a particular race.<sup>266</sup> But to claim that any old ostension will work equally well is to deny the variable specificity that language allows for. It is to overlook the difference in our two soccer examples above. Certain communications are *mere* ostension, the sort for which hand waiving might be successfully substituted. Others, however, require a more fine-grained form of ostension, the sort that is dependent on the semantic complexity and

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<sup>265</sup> We will discuss this form of implicit dependence below. This example is likewise an analogue to what John Haugeland describes as derivative versus original intentionality; see (2000) Chapter Seven.

<sup>266</sup> In fact, this is a point at which I am in strong agreement with Dreyfus. My claim, however, is that in mature humans the relation of meaning dependence between language and skillful action is mutual rather than isomorphic.

specificity of an appropriate speech act. This is true even when we necessarily do not respond to the speech act with any sort of reflection on its semantic content.

Despite these important differences, square dancing allows us to highlight two other often-overlooked ways in which language is integrated with our coping practices. First, while my case depends on the constitutive role played by the semantic meaning of language used to reinforce flow in certain scenarios, it is important to recognize the incredibly diverse nature of language and the ways in which we use it. Doing so highlights the inextricably integrated nature of language and coping. As we've already seen, language functions along a spectrum from thoroughly pragmatic to decontextualized meanings. We make use of language in ways that are wholly context-dependent, wherein the meaning of our expressions cannot be exported without exporting the context as well. Our first soccer example above, the verbalized warning of the approaching attack, is an example. Here words function as part of the non-linguistic environment.<sup>267</sup> Such uses can be contrasted with our examples of unreflective expressions deployed as a means to remain in-flow, but where the pragmatic success of the expression is dependent on the semantic content and specificity of the speech act (e.g., our second soccer example). In these latter cases, the meaning of the expression is (critically) analyzable in multiple contexts, even when the speech act itself is highly contextual.<sup>268</sup> Expressions can also be (at least relatively) context-

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<sup>267</sup> As should be clear by now, I'm skeptical as to whether even these sorts of purely pragmatic uses of language can function as they do for humans if divorced from the rest of our linguistic practices. That is, I claim that ostension for linguistically competent humans is something different than functional ostension is for non-linguistic animals, just as perception is different. Nevertheless, my point is that there is significant variation along a spectrum with regard to how pragmatic and context-dependent our speech acts can be holds true regardless of whether there exists "pure" pragmatic and semantic poles.

<sup>268</sup> Contextualism in philosophy of language is a hotbed of contemporary debate, and I do not mean to take a stand on any of the numerous issues in the literature (see Preyer and

independent, as in certain theoretical contexts. The fact of this spectrum calls into question the plausibility of maintaining a strong separation between our linguistic and other coping practices.

Second, it is significant that language—actual words, whether written or spoken—can itself function as a part of the environment in which we cope. Words are as real and practical an element of our everyday environment as are things like hammers, nails, and workshops.<sup>269</sup> It is clear that professional callers, like adepts in other domains, operate in the flow. They must be keyed in to the overall situation and respond verbally to the specifics of the dancers, musicians, and dance hall conditions. Their ability to make instant adjustments and produce a steady stream of not just calls but likewise amicable chatter is analogous to the ways in which jazz musicians improvise in a manner sensitive to their surroundings. The caller's view of the overall dance floor quite literally affords their calling ability, and the specific conditions solicit various calls. Language is pragmatically and unreflectively available, and we skillfully make use of it as we do any other piece of equipment, and particular uses of language are afforded by situations just as are other embodied actions. This is true for the square dance caller just as it is in a theoretical situation for a philosopher of language.

Here then, we have a second way in which the integrated nature of language and skillful practice manifests itself. One of the ways in which we experience the complex phenomenon of language is within the practical world. We become sensitized to the

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Peter 2005 for an overview). I only want to point out that an important aspect of the meaningfulness of our typical expressions is dependent on their meaning being accessible in contexts outside the ones in which they are deployed.

<sup>269</sup> Joseph Rouse similarly notes the practical nature of linguistic practice in (2005). See also (2002), especially Chapter 6.

affordances of language in the same way that we become sensitized to the other features and affordances of our environment. That is, not only can language operate to change the contours of the field of forces in which we cope, but likewise there exists for us a contour of forces operative within the “linguistic field” or environment with which we cope. This fact cuts across all linguistic scenarios. While it isn’t possible to fully explore this feature of language here, I will share two quick examples that I believe make plausible my claim that we skillfully cope with language just as we do the other practices Dreyfus notes.

First, consider the exercise of grading or proofreading papers—an activity with which instructors in philosophy are intimately familiar. While reading the text one comes across a missing or misplaced comma. It is not the case that in such scenarios one then appeals to explicit rules (at least not if one is a skillful editor). One does not need to determine the operative grammar and associative punctuation conventions and then make an inference as to whether a comma should or should not be so placed. Quite the opposite, one finds that immersed in the activity of reading one feels solicited by the topography of the sentence. Missing commas are felt as an absence, while misplaced commas are felt as error—not as an infraction of a rule, but as a sort of repulsion. This is true even if one cannot immediately call to mind precisely what the rule is; if challenged, one might have to resort to a style guide, unable to actually articulate the specific reason why a comma does or does not belong.<sup>270</sup>

More commonly, this experience of the linguistic affordances of one’s environment is readily apparent to all skillful members of a linguistic community when engaged in

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<sup>270</sup> I do not mean to imply that there is always a determinate grammatical rule in operation. Often times what we call grammar rules are defeasible norms or rules of thumb. Much as in Dreyfusian examples of skillful coping, one can be solicited while proofreading by a multi-valent axis of improvement conditions.

conversation. Merleau-Ponty himself notes this phenomenon. “In the experience of dialogue . . . my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion. . . . we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity.” Again, “the objection which my interlocutor raises to what I say draws from me thoughts which I had no idea I possessed.”<sup>271</sup> In conversation (at least when the conversation “flows”) it is common to feel expressions drawn out of us without deliberating on what it is we ought to say. In fact, deliberation in speech is capable of having the same degrading effect as deliberation in action. Dialogue is capable of being instantiated in an experience that is akin to being in flow. “The words fully occupy our mind and exactly fulfill our expectations, and we feel the necessity of the speech. Although we are unable to predict its course, we are possessed by it. The end of the speech or text will be the lifting of a spell. It is at this stage that thoughts on the speech or text will be able to arise.”<sup>272</sup> Dreyfus quotes this very passage and notes: “It seems that masters in all domains can perform at their best only when they go into this sort of non-thinking spell.”<sup>273</sup> Unlike Dreyfus, however, Merleau-Ponty notices the parallel way in which we operate in flow while speaking or reading. Just as in the activity of, say, chess, we are capable of breaking off or shifting in order to directly deliberate at any time, but we are also capable of being drawn in to conceptual activity without the need to reflect and deliberate.

The parallel nature of speaking and acting in a “sort of non-thinking spell” is on account of the fact that speaking and acting in flow are both instantiations of our ability to skillfully, unreflectively maneuver within our environment. Conceptual capacities are

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<sup>271</sup> 1958: 13.

<sup>272</sup> 209.

<sup>273</sup> 2013: 28.

practical capacities. If we accept the phenomenon of our transparently (i.e., inconspicuously) coping in our conceptual activities like reading (as the above quote shows that Dreyfus does), then it seems odd to ruffle at the suggestion that our conceptuality can transparently (i.e., inconspicuously) play a role in our practical coping activities (e.g., when fielding a hard-hit grounder at second base<sup>274</sup>).

In addition to making plausible my claim that the integration between skillful practice and language operates in both directions—that is, language can operate to reinforce flow, and likewise we can be in flow in our linguistic practices—this latter point reveals the possibility of our retroactive (i.e., post-coping) reflection being apt to the experience. One of the joys of literate life is unquestionably our ability to be sucked into the world of a compelling story. Much as Merleau-Ponty describes, we experience our reading of a good novel as a kind of bewitching, an immersion into the world that the story creates. The world arises for us without deliberation, without having to infer meaning from the words or sentences. Yet it would be more than odd, should I ask my wife “What are you reading,” for her to reply, “Well, I can point out some generalities, but I don’t think what I’m reading is actually amenable to linguistic articulation.” This response (aside from the implausibility of anyone talking this way) would be absurd since the experience of the book is itself an experience of conceptual, linguistic discourse—albeit one that reveals how deeply our conceptual and other skillful capacities are integrated. This fact likewise

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<sup>274</sup> Note that this particular point is negative. I have not shown that if we have one capacity (e.g., skillful coping) that functions inconspicuously, then a different capacity (e.g., conceptuality) must also be able to function inconspicuously. Rather, I’m pointing out that it is inconsistent for Dreyfus to remain skeptical of conceptual capacities being engaged simply because they are not phenomenologically conspicuous (i.e., we do not actively reflect) when he accepts the inconspicuous involvement of other capacities. (An example of his skepticism is the epigram quoted above.) We will return to this point below.

suggests that Dreyfus's Refrigerator Light worries—worries that conceptual articulation of coping experience will inevitably transform the nature of the experience<sup>275</sup>—are overwrought. While we are certainly capable of misarticulating or failing to capture our experience, there is not an in-principle inadequacy of linguistic expression to articulate our experience, even if we have no ability to do so in certain situations.<sup>276</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In this chapter I argued that Dreyfus's sketch of a gradual transition from nonconceptual coping to conceptual activity is an unsatisfactory resolution to his partitioning of human experience. This is in part because intermediate steps along the way demand an account no less than the larger transition from nonconceptual to conceptual. Nevertheless his phenomenology of these intermediary "stages" is compelling, and I suggested they make more sense as evidence for an underlying continuity—a suggestion I will take back up in the next chapter.

Rather than attacking his dualism, however, my efforts here have been focused on working out an alternative. I laid out a positive account for how it is that our absorbed coping practices—as described by Dreyfus—can be properly understood as conceptual. I work out McDowell's claim that conceptual capacities are "operational though not exercised" in coping practices to mean that the conceptual capacities of mature humans are

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<sup>275</sup> See discussion in Chapters Two and Three.

<sup>276</sup> In addition to being "immersed" in the experience of reading, we can likewise tune out completely and read on auto-pilot. I regularly wander off mentally while reading to my children, only to be startled back to the book a page or two later, utterly unable to recall what I've read. Nevertheless it seems absurd to posit that my conceptual capacities in such situations are not operative in the course of reading. Such experiences again suggest that reflective attention is not a requirement for operations of our conceptual capacities.

no less at work in the meaningful disclosure of the world than are our skillful dispositions. Just as the integrated nature of our perceptual modalities means that, for instance, our tactile modality qualitatively changes the nature of visual perception, so too our conceptuality is integrated in such a way that perception itself is different than it otherwise would be. This can be understood analogously to Dreyfus's claims concerning the intentional arc. Our past skillful engagements collude with our present perceptions in order to disclose the world and its affordances, making perception different for the novice than for the expert. Allowing ourselves to be drawn into the affordances so disclosed adds to our cumulative background familiarity, which will in turn be at work in any future disclosure. Consequently, our skillful coping is at work whether or not we are aware of that fact. The same can be said of our conceptual capacities and experiences, which continually refine our ability to meaningfully perceive and experience the world. This means that the unity of perception in motor-intentional experience is in part a function of our conceptuality. This is manifest in the fact that motor-intentional experience is both amenable to linguistic articulation and firmly embedded in the space of reason.

In this chapter I argued for this account by giving a more careful phenomenology than Dreyfus offers of the ways that language integrates with our skillful coping practices. Specifically, I've shown that semantically dependent (and thus conceptual as opposed to *merely* practical) speech acts are deployed in order to help us remain in-flow and cope more successfully. Likewise, I've shown that the hallmarks of skillful coping are no less manifest in our linguistic activities than they are in our other practical engagements. That is, we cope with our linguistic world just as we do the other worlds of our experience.

All of this adds weight to my primary thesis that conceptual capacities and skillful dispositions are integrated with our perceptual modalities in such a way as to jointly disclose our phenomenal field. There is more support for this thesis than can be given in careful phenomenology, however, as I will show in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### LANGUAGE AND PRACTICAL ENGAGEMENT:

#### AN INTIMATE DANCE

#### PART II

The job of the phenomenologists is to get clear concerning the phenomena that need to be explained.  
-Huber L. Dreyfus<sup>277</sup>

Even if none of the existing categories is sufficient to characterize engaged activity, there is nothing in principle that keeps the first-person logical analyst from uncovering their essential structure. Indeed, the very act of differentiating engaged activity from other kinds of intentionality is itself an application of the method of logical analysis. It is logical analysis, however, that is applied to the phenomenological facts.  
-Sean D. Kelly<sup>278</sup>

In this and the preceding chapter I have two theses that I am trying to prove. The first is that our conceptual capacities are just as involved (and involved in the same way) in perception as are our skillful capacities. That is, I argue that perception grants us access to a world that is intelligible in terms of our perceptual modalities, skillful dispositions, and conceptual capacities. What's more, these capacities—perception, skillful disposition, and conceptuality—are not compartmentalized aspects of our access to the world but are integrated in such a way as to co-constitute our human domain of intelligibility. Second, I argue for the related claim that our experience generally, and specifically the motor intentional content that Dreyfus draws our attention to, is conceptual. As noted in Chapter

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<sup>277</sup> 2005: 4.

<sup>278</sup> 2005: 21-22.

Four, this is a matter of its being conceptually unified, amenable to discursive practices, and normatively responsive to reasons.

This chapter is intended to compliment the arguments of the last chapter in order to establish these theses. Here I aim to do three things. First, I seek to clarify what these theses mean, to further state what it is for our capacities to be integrated and why we are justified in taking even motor-intentional experience as conceptual. Second, while in the last chapter I focused on the practical integration of language with skillful coping, in this chapter I will focus on the ways in which conceptuality operates in order to allow the world to show itself to us in the way that phenomenologists like Dreyfus describe. Finally, having further clarified and argued on behalf of my conceptualist alternative to Dreyfus's experiential dualism, I will illustrate the potency of this synthetic position to overcome the shortcomings of both Dreyfus and McDowell in their discussion of transparent social norms such as distance-standing practices.

### **I. Concepts and the intentional arc**

To begin, it's uncontroversial that concepts are at work in certain perceptions. Dreyfus explicitly states that he is not opposed to "the claim that conceptual activity is required for *some* types of perceiving and acting. That claim is obviously true." For example, Heidegger claims, "What we 'first' hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking waggon, the motor-cycle. We hear the column on the march, the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the fire crackling. It requires a very artificial and complicated frame of mind to 'hear' a 'pure noise'."<sup>279</sup> This point can be extended to our other modalities.

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<sup>279</sup> 1962: 207/163-164.

Perceiving in an everyday manner, including perception involved while expertly coping (or what Dreyfus calls “in the flow”) is obviously not William James’s “great blooming, buzzing confusion.”<sup>280</sup> What we perceive is a unified environment in its familiar intelligibility—wagon, motorcycle, fire—given to us *as* that for which we have a concept. In saying this, however, we need to be careful. It would be incorrect to posit our concepts as something that attaches to an aspect that we perceive. There is no *deployment* of a concept in perception. As Heidegger notes, perception and conceptually grasping what we perceive are not two separate but one single thing. My concept of the cup, on the table before me now, *is* that which I now perceive. Perception itself grants us access to a world that is already intelligible in terms of our concepts.

This point is highlighted by the impact of language on perception. When unreflectively taking in a room we do not simply perceive sensible features—red, plush texture, chest-high, etc. Nor mere affordances—for-sitting, obstacle-in-path, etc. As noted, we perceive a *chair*, even if we do not reflect on it *as* a chair. Likewise *how* a perception is expressed is part of the perception itself. One does not normally reflect on or infer or struggle to describe the scene with which one is presented in perception. Language infects perception, and corresponding to our level of expressive skill, we receptively encounter the world expressively, just as we receptively encounter solicitations.<sup>281</sup>

Of course, this isn’t always true. Sometimes I am unsure of what is before me.

Sometimes I’m forced to attend to or focus in on something resisting my attempt to place it.

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<sup>280</sup> 1981: 462.

<sup>281</sup> There is much more that could be said here about the cross-pollination that takes place between the multidimensional ways we encounter and cope with our environment (discussed in Chapter Two) and our diverse ability to express that experience. Importantly, while I cannot argue for this here, I think that there are elements of both intentional comportment and speech that are irreducibly non-propositional.

We're all familiar with the gestalt switch that can take place as an unfamiliar object "transforms" into a familiar one. While such switches *can* take place reflectively, often they do not—there is no inference, no deliberative piecing together of clues. Rather, we merely adjust our perception (whether by moving or staring) and the indeterminate perception pops into view as a familiar object. Sometimes this happens irrevocably and all at once—such as when presented with an abstract drawing that resolves itself into a picture and we are thereafter unable to re-experience the initial unfamiliarity. Something similar happens gradually, however, as our familiarity with a new kind of object increases. For example, the homogeneity and maze-like quality of a new neighborhood gradually settles into a more familiar route sprinkled with helpful landmarks and eventually into a completely familiar layout that guides one without deliberation on whether to turn here or there.

I will have more to say on this below. At this point, however, I want to draw attention to two structural features of everyday life: first, the uncontroversial fact that in much of everyday life concepts are unreflectively at work in perception; that is, it is uncontroversial that our conceptual capacities can be unreflectively (i.e., non-judgmentally, without an active deployment) operative in experience, structuring our perception. Second, our more refined discriminations made in the wake of experience are often conceptual; that is, conceptuality is a part of the intentional arc at work in perception. In fact, given the sheer quantity of our experience with and understanding of any given environment in which we find ourselves that is (uncontroversially) conceptual, it would be odd if concepts did not function in our intentional arc.

As noted, however, even though this is true for a significant portion of experience—those familiar aspects of our environment for which we possess concepts—Dreyfus's claim

is that this cannot be pervasively true. Perception outstrips our conceptual repertoire. Nevertheless, as we saw in Chapter Three and noted above, the conceptualism I advocate is not dependent on the specifics of one's conceptual repertoire, but on the very nature of perception. According to Dreyfus, however, even in the obvious case when we have a concept for, say, the doorknob, this concept plays absolutely no role in our pragmatic perception and use of the doorknob. Hence, much more needs to be said concerning the way in which conceptuality structures the pre- and not just post-gestalt switch in perception. That is, I want to agree with Dreyfus's phenomenology on this point (that our reflectively deployed concept 'doorknob' does not have a pragmatic role in our coping with the doorknob; that there is a difference between reflecting on the doorknob *as* a doorknob and merely pragmatically treating it as such) without yielding to his analytical conclusion that the doorknob as unreflectively experienced is therefore nonconceptual.

While the two points I've noted—that our concepts unreflectively structure perception and are involved in the intentional arc of world-disclosure—seem relatively tame, I believe their implications are very important. For one, they provide an answer to Dreyfus's question concerning how conceptual capacities (whether or not they involve specific concepts) can be unreflectively *operative* without being *exercised*. Conceptuality is at work *in the same sense* in which our past skillful engagements (i.e., our developed skillful dispositions) are at work in perception—enriching the manner and fineness with which we discriminate our environment. If this is right, then it also means that the difference between my pragmatically coping with the doorknob—responding to it practically as a doorknob—versus my reflecting on it *as* a doorknob can be a difference in how the doorknob plays a role in my activity or with which capacities I focus in on the doorknob,

and not a difference in its having a conceptual versus nonconceptual content or structure. That is, we can recognize different modes of engagement without having to posit different contents or ontologies in experience.

## **II. Perception, skillful dispositions, and conceptual capacities**

We need to say more about this. One might posit—as Dreyfus does—that even if it is true that the concepts we’ve gained can affect our perceptions at the level of perception, this capacity might be limited. It might be the case that only specific concepts—as opposed to conceptual capacities—are at work. Or it might be the case that conceptuality is only brought to bear given a specific attitude or manner of experiencing things so that we possess what is in effect two different modes of perception. If this were true, as Dreyfus seems to think, then while we might have answered the question of how conceptuality can be operative without being exercised, we will not have shown experience to be exhaustively conceptual. My answer to this challenge is cumulative. In the end, I hope to show that my conceptualism is more phenomenologically and more conceptually satisfying than the dichotomy of experience Dreyfus must posit in order to maintain his form of nonconceptuality.

To begin, I want to cast doubt on the notion that we can break experience into a dichotomy of practical versus reflective engagements by sketching an alternative that I find far more plausible. It’s true that objects are available to me in different ways—I can take the hammer *as* a hammer in a purely practical sense, by reaching for and hammering with it, or I can take it *as* a hammer in the sense of conceptually identifying it as such. While it might be true that many of our activities are to one degree or another polarized toward

these modes of engagements, the key is to note that it *is* a matter of degree. This is the real lesson of Dreyfus's Heideggerian phenomenology of breakdown discussed in Chapter Four—reflection or other modes of conceptual activity in our experiences are an inherent possibility and are more or less realized depending on the nature of the activity and the challenges we confront in the accomplishment of our given task.

Someone wishing to maintain the dichotomy between practical and conceptual activity—and the two ontologically distinct kinds of hammer that are revealed in these separate activities—could challenge the notion of variance (i.e., the matter of degree) posited between them. For example, one might argue that rather than the gradual insertion of a progressively more reflective take on a practically obstinate or malfunctioning hammer, what is happening amounts to a temporal distinction—how much time am I reflecting on rather than merely hammering? As the hammer progressively breakdowns on a practically level perhaps I momentarily reflect, switching back and forth quickly between the two activities until finally I can no longer hammer and so remain completely in a reflective mode of engagement. This might be true (and in certain cases it surely is). Nevertheless, such an objection is not available to Dreyfus who elaborates on the various stages of breakdown and the various kinds of hammer we experience at these stages.<sup>282</sup> As already stated, I find this description of gradation compelling, and as I will make clear, this argues in favor of rather than against my alternative.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> See (1991): 70-79.

<sup>283</sup> Nevertheless, nothing crucial hangs on this point. My argument articulated below—that our separate activities of practical versus reflective engagement depend on an underlying continuity in the way the world is intelligibly disclosed—stands whether or not there exists a grade of variance between practical and reflective engagements.

While I argued above that Dreyfus's account of breakdown fails to bridge the gap, this is only because Dreyfus insists that the gap is ontological. By contrast, we ought instead to recognize the engagement of different capacities toward the accomplishment of some task in the same sense as we understand differing modalities at play in any given perception. I can—and fluidly do—tune out or hone in (either by degree or all at once) one modality or another in order to optimize my overall perception and so improve my grasp on a situation. For example, walking into a dimly lit room, I do not close my eyes (which wouldn't, in any case, make my phenomenal field devoid of vision) but I do focus my attention less acutely on vision and more acutely on hearing in order to detect whether my daughter is asleep in the bed on the right or the bed on the left. Hearing her breathing to my left trains both my gaze and bodily position. Unreflectively, this auditory deliverance coordinates with my vision (and potentially with other modalities as well), and on the basis of my background familiarity in coping with things like bedrooms and sleeping children, I am able to recognize the nearly indistinguishable mass of blanket and hair, almost entirely disguised as lumps of shadow, as my daughter.

This is certainly not to claim that the deliverances of sight are the same as the deliverances of sound. Rather, there are three points I mean to highlight with this example. First, my visual and auditory modalities are fully integrated and coordinated in a way that grants me access to an intelligibly unified domain—my phenomenal field. It is not the case that the object of my daughter is ontologically distinct depending on whether I am visually or auditorially attending to her. Nor is it generally the case that we bring only one or another modality to bear on a scene (whether or not we reflectively or unreflectively hone

in with a particular modality as in the example given). Rather, we fluidly and skillfully tune in and out our various modalities in order to optimize perception.

This brings us to my second point. Even when attending to the deliverances of one modality like hearing, it is not the case that my auditory capacity is divorced from my other modalities. Without noticing, and even when I intentionally attend to one or the other, sight trains hearing and vice versa in order to produce an intelligible perception. This is because, as we discussed in Chapter Four, the nature of my auditory capacity and the meaning of its deliverances are different than they would be were I incapable of, for example, seeing the world. The point is deeper, however. Our experience of perception is not one of building up intelligible objects or surroundings by combining the deliverances of our separate modalities. Perception is (at least under normal circumstances) irreducibly multi-modal.<sup>284</sup>

Third, as already noted, the degree to which one or another modality is brought to bear is a function of one's environmental and teleological constraints. The way in which I skillfully bring my plurality of senses to bear in order to optimally gain access to my environment is a function of the task in which I am engaged and the obstacles (e.g., lighting) inherent in the situation. In doing so, however, my phenomenal field continues to be a function of the integration of each of my senses, which remain to some degree engaged. Consequently the shift in "emphasis" from vision to hearing is not a matter of a radical change or a change in the kind of meaningful intelligibility available to me. Instead, it is a shift in perspective or aspectual emphasis. My daughter—the object of my perception

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<sup>284</sup> "Each contact of an object with part of our body is . . . in reality a contact with the whole of the present or possible phenomenal body" Merleau-Ponty (1959: 369). See also, Matthew Nudds (2001) who uses empirical case studies involving ventriloquism and movies whose picture and sound are slightly off in order to argue that vision dominates hearing in such experiences, rendering our perceptions irreducibly multi-modal.

whether or not the lights are on—remains my daughter. And *she* is what I (at least initially) perceive in normal circumstances, rather than a sound or bit of visual stimulus.

Analogously, my conceptual capacities remain engaged to one degree or another in even my most practical engagements (and vice versa), if in no other sense than as being ready for a more active engagement should either the end toward which I strive or the demands of my situation call for it. Notice that it is not the case that my past skillful engagements are at play in my perception—and in the intelligibility of the world—only to the degree that I actively bring those skills to bear in some specific task. Rather, my skillful grasp on the world as a whole, my ability to bodily and competently make my way around my environment, is constitutive of my experience generally. That which I encounter is intelligible *sensually*, but that sensuality is itself intelligible in terms of my skills and dispositions—and this is just as true when I encounter new objects and activities as it is when involved with familiar ones. Our skillful dispositions—what we are pragmatically capable of and ready with—change the nature of perception itself. They change what we have available before us in perception, which in turn changes our opportunities for practical engagement. This continual and holistic cycle of enrichment is what Dreyfus means by intentional arc. If our conceptual grasp of the world is likewise involved, then by implication we ought to understand conceptual capacities as affecting a structural change, rather than as a dissociative capacity that can only be brought to bear in the wake of perception. Conceptuality changes the nature of how things can show up to us, independently of whether a given perception is structured by a specific concept and independently of whether our current *telos* and the conditions of the task call for greater reflective engagement.

The gradualism of breakdown also shows us something else. We do occasionally “startle” out of our unreflective coping—when, for example, we are confronted with an obstinate object or torn from our absorption in reading by an unfamiliar name or word that demands attention. The reason this takes place, and the reason reflection is efficacious is because our conceptuality is already engaged and already a feature of the activity in which we are involved. Rather than a radical shift of the sort Dreyfus posits, we ought to see the change as merely bringing our attention to bear in a different way. “Waking” from practical into reflective attention (which again, is typically a matter of degree rather than a sharply contrasted changeover) is merely a matter of our conceptuality, which normally remains silent, making itself known or becoming conspicuous (e.g., when things aren’t going right or when I need to engage in a different practice in order to properly cope).

The plausibility of this alternative lies in part in its avoidance of Dreyfus’s dualism. It’s no longer mysterious how it is that reflection is able to reflectively take up what was before us practically since conceptuality was already involved in the disclosure—both in structuring the intelligibility of the situation and also in its readiness to be brought to bear. This alternative is also preferable in terms of its phenomenological fit. While breakdown as a matter of degree can indeed result in our taking up our environment in a different way, the experience nonetheless remains an experience of being engaged with the same environment and toward the same end. Rather than being capable of two wholly separate and distinct modes of engagement with our environment, we are teleologically engaged in a situation made holistically intelligible by the integration of our perceptual, conceptual, and skillful capacities. From within any given activity, we are thus capable, to one degree or

another, of taking up our environment according to how it is intelligibly perceived—whether practical or conceptual, and to whatever degree appropriate.<sup>285</sup>

### III. Skillfully coping with conceptual teleologies

The teleologically structured nature of perception leads us to another crucial point. Conceptuality is involved in the nature of our *telos*, which is in turn constitutive of the intelligibility of human activity, even when engaged in “merely” practical coping. I will make this clear by examining the way in which conceptuality is involved, whether one looks at our most immediate experiences or the existential structure that is, as Dreyfus notes, always in the “background.” In order to get into this discussion it will be helpful to distinguish two modes of teleologically structured differential behavior (both of which get discussed as genuine forms of normativity) before examining motor intentionality.<sup>286</sup>

First, one can discuss a given biological function as a form of teleonaturalized normativity,<sup>287</sup> for example in the differential responsiveness at play in the intestinal absorption and passing of various nutrients. Such functions are said to be *normative* within the holistic and statistical context of the overall working of an organism or in terms of

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<sup>285</sup> Note that this is not to flatten out experience. I am not denying either of the possible modes of experience in Dreyfus’s dichotomy. I am denying first that the possibilities are ontologically distinct in the strong sense that Dreyfus claims, and denying that they represent a dichotomy rather than a spectrum of continuous possible engagement. Throughout this chapter I mean to argue that human conceptuality is what it is in part because we are skillfully disposed animals, and vice versa. Likewise, the nature of the intelligibility of any experience is jointly co-structured by our perceptual and conceptual capacities together with our skillful dispositions.

<sup>286</sup> The point here is only to briefly sketch out well-known categories in order to focus on the nature of skillful coping, rather than give an exhaustive outline of normativity. For a much more detailed and substantive discussion of the varieties of normativity and how they are instantiated see John Haugeland’s (2000): 305-361.

<sup>287</sup> See Ruth Millikan (1984) for a paradigmatic example.

evolutionary fitness. Norms governing component functions (e.g., digestion in the lower ileum) are intelligible in terms of their interdependent roles in enabling the whole system to succeed (i.e., in reproductive or evolutionary terms).

This causally operative form of normativity is easily distinguished from the non-causal, intentional normativity operative at the agential level—for example, when I consciously decide to abide by the speed limit. Here there is a fact of the matter as to what the speed limit is and what it would be to follow it. I am reflectively directed toward the observance of this norm and consequently not only capable of succeeding or failing in according with the norm, but likewise capable of being mistaken as to what the norm is. Normativity here (as opposed to the norms at play in digestion) is a paradigmatically conceptual operation. One conceptually grasps (or is mistaken about) the norm (in this case, the law) and through the explicit, intentional exercise of one's conceptual capacities attempts to adhere to it. Hence the norm itself *as a norm*—that is, the meaning or significance that the norm has for us, its normative force—plays a constitutive role in one's behavioral comportment.

As we've already seen, Dreyfus calls our attention to another form of normativity. Here one follows a rule that one may or may not conceptually grasp (e.g., chess masters have a conceptual grasp of the rules of chess, though one can imagine becoming even highly skilled at certain games without being able to articulate precisely what the rules are<sup>288</sup>). Adherence to the rule, however, comes not through a conscious directedness toward the rule, but merely through allowing oneself to be skillfully drawn into the activity in question and acting on the affordances disclosed in one's practical engagement. Here the rule still

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<sup>288</sup> This is particularly true of professional athletics where the rules are complex and technical. Even the best athletes are often incapable of adequately explicating them.

plays a constitutive role, however. One responds to the meanings made available through the rules themselves, but does so without explicit or implicit application of the rules. That is, the rules and their normative force still play a causal role, but without our conscious awareness of this fact.<sup>289</sup> Because of the unreflective and bodily nature of this kind of comportment, Dreyfus believes it to be nonconceptual.

While correct in his phenomenological description, Dreyfus is wrong in his conclusions concerning the nonconceptual nature of this form of rule-governed comportment. That is, while skillful coping in rule-governed situations like chess is neither a brutally causal nor a reflective application of rules, it is in fact a form of conceptual activity, a subset of the more general category of our explicit, reflective mode of rule-following comportment. This is because skillful coping in such situations is a teleological activity (in the sense of having a rule-governed orientation toward a specific goal), and our ability to cope according to a rule-governed teleology is only possible to the degree that our coping and how the world shows up to us is rationally responsive or accountable to those rules—that is, conceptual.

First, consider Dreyfus's illuminating discussion concerning the way in which perception in skillful coping is of a field of forces drawing us toward various possibilities that result in an optimal resolution of the felt tensions experienced. Thus, for example, the chess master is drawn toward moves not by applying or even considering the rules of chess or good strategy, but merely in response to the tensions that are a part of his perception of the chess pieces arrayed before him. It is not reflection on or explicit application of rules

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<sup>289</sup> I will follow Mark Wrathall's helpful categorization of these different possibilities into behaviors that *accord* with a rule, intentional rule-*following*, and being motor intentionally rule-*governed*. See (2007).

that allows the master to sense the appropriate possibilities or to see the board as a field of forces. Nevertheless, conceptual rules just are the phenomenon that structures the disclosure of the chess situation. Dreyfus is surely right to claim that once the rules are sufficiently learned, they are no longer needed and withdraw from the scene. Nevertheless, he overstates the nature of their disappearance.

It's not that the rules are scaffolding which then goes away. Rather, they continue to play an implicit role. We must be careful, however, in stating what is meant by 'implicit.' It is not the case that the rules continue to play an explicit though unnoticed role. For example, one might try to account for our ability to respond skillfully to a situation by claiming that it must be the case that we continue to literally apply the rule—perhaps subconsciously or sub-personally or so quickly as not to notice. This is the approach taken by classical AI, and Dreyfus is surely right to criticize the mistaken assumptions concerning human rationality at play there. Nevertheless, the rules are implicit in terms of their structuring and serving to bring about our situated experience, and in the sense that we remain accountable to them (and could not engage in the given activity if we did not).<sup>290</sup> In chess, the master's experience of the gestalt of pieces and squares as a tension demanding a certain response is itself an experience of the rules. We do not gain a skillful attunement to the brute presence of pieces and board; rather, we gain a skillful attunement to the meanings and possibilities presented by pieces and board as governed by the rules of the game. We need not be directed toward rules in order to experience the (conceptually) disclosed meanings and possibilities. Instead, our conceptual capacities, together with our

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<sup>290</sup> Robert Pippin endorses a similar notion of implicit: "A complex, conceptually articulated engagement can become implicit, *unattended to as such*, but nevertheless *responsible* for those aspects in our engagement with the world without which there could not be determinate content to experience" (2013: fn 7).

skillful dispositions garnered from past experience, disclose in perception an intelligible scene and we motor-intentionally act on the affordances available therein.

This phenomenon of conceptually structured perception can also be seen in a related normative phenomenon that Dreyfus has helped bring to light—the hierarchically structured nature of intelligible activity. As Heidegger notes, human experience is existentially structured by a “for-the-sake-of-which.”<sup>291</sup> Our intelligent, human activity is hierarchically structured in the sense that what we are most immediately engaged in is always pragmatically in the service of some other activity (e.g., writing a chapter, in order to complete a dissertation, for the purpose of finishing my PhD). These “higher-order” activities are themselves ultimately grounded in and made intelligible by a teleological for-the-sake-of instantiating one or more of the ways in which it is possible for me to be in this time and place (e.g., finishing a PhD for-the-sake-of being a philosopher). This hierarchical structure, which in turn serves to structure the intelligibility of any given activity we undertake, is something that Dreyfus endorses.<sup>292</sup>

As he notes, however, one’s for-the-sake-of-which need not be explicit or something we are capable of fully articulating, despite its being operative in intelligibly disclosing the world and its practical possibilities to us. I agree. Nevertheless, like the master’s experience of playing chess, our for-the-sake-of-which is conceptually dependent, and consequently the nature of the world as disclosed is likewise (at least implicitly) conceptual. Let me clarify two points here. First, I do not mean to say that the structuring of our experience according to a for-the-sake-of-which is identical to the structuring of the chess master’s experience of the game. In our example of the chess master, it was the specific (codified)

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<sup>291</sup> See (1962): §18.

<sup>292</sup> See (1991): Chapter 5.

rules and goal that structured the disclosed possibilities of the game. It would be a mistake to think that the structure imparted by a for-the-sake-of-which is similarly reducible to codifiable rules. Likewise, the teleology of our socially embedded possibilities is normatively-governed in a way that is distinct from the possibilities in playing chess. Being a father or partnering to create a happy family is not rigidly set in the way that being a rook or aiming at checkmate is. At times, being a father requires us to press into new situations and avail ourselves of actions not previously recognized as belonging to fatherhood.

Second, and on the other end of the spectrum, it's possible that non-linguistic animal experience might also be describable in terms of a for-the-sake-of-which. If so, however, it is of a different order than that of humans. Stating how this is so helps to highlight the nature of the teleological structure of human experience. Our for-the-sake-of-which is conceptual in nature, even if our election and carrying out of a for-the-sake-of-which is merely practical. As humans we can be chess masters, bakers, parents, monks, philosophers, and the myriad of other socially embedded possibilities that our being social and linguistic animals affords us. It is self-evident that some of these roles are dependent on our being conceptual—for example being a scholar. Nevertheless, it is not just that one could not be a scholar without exercising one's conceptual capacities, but that any understanding of what it is to be a scholar likewise requires one's conceptual understanding. Being a scholar is irreducibly a conceptual and not merely a practical possibility. This is true of all genuinely human ends—at the least, they require one to understand what does and does not count as taking up that end. Again, this is not because we need to conceptually grasp the codified rules of the ends we pursue (though sometimes this might be the case; it's not clear that one could be a lawyer without grasping the rules of

law, the pursuit of which is central to lawyering). It requires an ability to defend one's actions if challenged. A dog can take up the actions of being a shepherd, perhaps even volitionally so. One can even imagine a dog as trained to somehow express that it is a shepherd. A dog could not, however, defend its actions as appropriate to the end of shepherding. Nor could a human be said to be a shepherd, even in a pragmatic sense, if he were utterly unable to rationally defend his actions. Human ends are never grasped in a merely pragmatic sense and could not function as genuinely human for-the-sakes-of-which without conceptual engagement.

One's experience, even motor-intentional experience, is conceptual then in the sense of being derived only from a for-the-sake-of-which that is itself conceptually normative in nature. Additionally, part of what it means for us, as conceptual animals, to press into practical possibilities is that we must be able to reason at least in a minimal sense about what is or is not appropriate and defend the conclusions we draw. By 'minimal sense' I mean that we find ourselves accountable to what does or does not count as correctly or appropriately carrying out the tasks or roles we adopt.<sup>293</sup> Our experience, governed by a for-the-sake-of-which, can thus license inference and is directly responsive to reasons. This is true even though, as Dreyfus notes, we might never have occasion to actually do so.

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<sup>293</sup> Usually we're accountable to (and held accountable by) other members of our society. This is in part because the tasks and roles we adopt are interdependently related to other tasks and roles (e.g., 'teacher' is interdependently related to 'student' and perhaps other roles such as 'administrator'). There may be exceptions where one has adopted a *sui generis* and independent for-the-sake-of-which. Even here, however, one remains accountable to oneself and the commitments one has undertaken. It might also be the case that one cannot say much about why a given task or behavior is at odds with one's for-the-sake-of-which. By accountable in a 'minimal sense' I merely mean that one nevertheless feels and can (in principle) identify that task or behavior as antithetical when confronted, or if given a strong reason why their behavior is inconsistent that they feel the normative burden to respond. If this were not true, it seems unclear that one is in fact operating within the normative constraints of a for-the-sake-of-which.

Something similar can be said of the nature of affordances experienced by humans. Even functioning as a purely practical solicitation, the *sort* of solicitations available to humans are different on account of our being conceptual animals. For both a cat and a human a door might afford going through or escaping. For humans, though not for cats or other nonconceptual animals, a door might also afford adventuring or exploration or playful activity (e.g., pranks). A door can be practically grasped not just as a mode of access for an attack, but also as a strategic vulnerability. In ancient Egypt, certain doors afforded the means for divine covenant or expression of authority.

To see more clearly the distinction being made, consider the fact that the affordances available in one's environment are in part a function of our physical capacities for action (thus, paintings do not afford gazing for the blind, though they might afford something else). Conceptuality is one more capacity that changes the nature of affordance. I think Robert Pippin attempts to get at this point when he scoffs, "as if affordances *just* draw us in *on their own*. (They wouldn't afford anything if we weren't so minded)."<sup>294</sup> This is obviously false—animals are solicited by their environment entirely devoid of conceptuality. The insight lies in the fact that affordance is not the same for humans as it is for animals since they cannot *be* solicited in the same sorts of ways. Situations afford what they do for us in part on account of our mindedness. Thus for humans, a situation might afford intimacy and not just sex, or a comment afford indignation and not just anger. Games afford playful action, conversations afford witty remarks, and a dance floor affords dancing.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> 2013:105.

<sup>295</sup> Charles Taylor makes a similar point with regard to the possibilities afforded to linguistic animals: "The semantic dimension also made the agent capable of new kinds of

The conceptuality of experience is not merely a matter of its being structured according to our conceptual understanding—whether derived from rules or a normative for-the-sake-of-which. In both situations one’s understanding, even in the practical sense of know-how, is subject to conceptual development in the form of conceptual reflection or criticism. Not only must one be able, as we saw above, to be minimally capable of inferential reasoning with regard to one’s practical situation, one must also be responsive to a conceptual refinement. While one might adopt and press into the possibilities of a for-the-sake-of-which in purely practical fashion, being human, we often do not. I reflectively elect to become a student, pursue a hobby, take a job, get married. Even when we unreflectively adopt a for-the-sake-of-which, however, our understanding remains responsive to conceptual engagement in the form of reflection or criticism. For example, I might be struck—perhaps but not necessarily in a breakdown scenario—by the realization that rather than excelling as a student, the practical reality of my life has been a selfishly hedonistic pursuit. Such realizations inevitably impact one’s for-the-sake-of-which,<sup>296</sup> and

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relations, new sorts of footing that agents can stand on with each other, of intimacy and distance, hierarchy and equality. Gregarious apes may have what we call a ‘dominant male,’ but only language beings can distinguish between leader, king, president, and the like. Animals mate and have offspring, but only language beings define kinship” (1994: 105-106). Similarly, he says elsewhere, “[Morally or spiritually profound] experiences . . . help us situate a place of fullness, to which we orient ourselves morally or spiritually. They can orient us because they offer some sense of what they are of: the presence of God, or the voice of nature, or the force which flows through everything, or the alignment in us of desire and the drive to form. But they are also often unsettling and enigmatic. Our sense of where they come from may also be unclear, confused, lacunary. We are deeply moved, but also puzzled and shaken. We struggle to articulate what we’ve been through. *If we succeed in formulating it, however partially, we feel a release, as though the power of the experience was increased by having been focused, articulated, and hence let fully be*” (2007: 6; italics added).

<sup>296</sup> Though not necessarily by abandoning it. For example, one might study philosophy for-the-sake-of pursuing law only to realize that one is far more caught up in philosophy than one had reflectively recognized, and upon realization switch majors—an action that in one

that is the point. Likewise, one might be genuinely solicited to aim a backhand stroke at an oncoming tennis ball, but this solicitation, even as a “purely” practical<sup>297</sup> event, remains vulnerable to the potential criticisms of one’s coach (e.g., if one *ought* to be solicited for a forehand stroke).

Again, the point here is that one’s world-disclosure—including one’s grasp on one’s for-the-sake-of-which, the generation of affordance as derived from one’s for-the-sake-of-which, and one’s actually being solicited by the affordances of a situation—even if it is not self-consciously grasped, remains susceptible to reflective revision. Thus, while spending a summer driving in England my whole orientation to driving had to switch. Reflection was inevitably a part of efficiently making the switch, reorienting my body and the way in which the driving environment solicited my body. Likewise, reflection can deepen our grasp of a given for-the-sake-of-which. It might be precisely the on-point critique of a loved one that motivates a change or it might be a refined reflective understanding of what it means to be a good public servant that effects a change in one’s practical orientation.

The teleologically structured nature of perception and intelligibility manifest two senses then in which human experience (including coping) is in fact conceptual. In the first place, we saw that our conceptual understanding—whether in the form of rules or the social possibilities for a given way of life—structures the intelligibility of our actions and perceptions. The field of forces arrayed before the chess master is a function of his

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sense merely brings your academic record into accord with your practical pursuits, but likewise serves as a practical action that reinforces one’s pragmatic adoption.

<sup>297</sup> I place scare-quotes around ‘purely’ in order to emphasize the fact that in skillful human activity of the sort that Dreyfus highlights there is no *purely* pragmatic action of the kind Dreyfus claims. My point throughout has been to show that rather than manifesting a dualism in human experience, such actions, while genuinely unreflective, are nevertheless pervaded by our conceptual capacities.

conceptual and masterful grasp of the rules of chess, just as his attendance at competitions, discussions with other masters, and the books he writes might all be activities made intelligible as a pursuit of his (non-rule-bound) for-the-sake-of being a chess player. This fact is also apparent in the conceptually dependent nature of human affordances. Chess games not only afford certain coordinated movements; they also afford such things as checkmate. What's more, to be said to have adopted a genuinely human way of life or to be solicited by a genuinely human affordance, we must be able to distinguish and so make inferences based on what does or does not count as an appropriate action. This is true, even if one could never do explicit justice to one's pragmatic competence in the situation. Second, we also saw that our understanding—including our practical know-how in a given situation—remains sensitive to conceptual refinement. Sometimes we misunderstand or gain a more refined conceptual understanding of a rule or what it means to pursue a given kind of life, and this change is accompanied by an attendant change in world-disclosure or in the way that things (practically) show up for us.

I will conclude this section by considering two possible objections—one from a conceptualist and one from a nonconceptualist perspective. Both objections demand a more protracted response than what I can give here, but I hope to make clear that neither objection warrants undue concern.

First, I have claimed that one reason why we ought to consider our unreflective coping practices conceptual is their ability to play a role in the space of reasons—both licensing various moves and likewise being responsive to conceptually explicit challenges and the like. I have also agreed with Dreyfus that much of what we do when coping is irreducibly non-propositional. One might wonder then, how it is that coping communicates

or inferentially interacts with propositional reasons since it is common today to characterize propositions as that which stands in an “is a reason for” relationship. How does non-propositional, embodied activity facilitate inference and likewise how is such activity responsive to reasons? Don’t we need to toss out the non-propositional along with the nonconceptual?

I think that this sort of objection is motivated by the same dualistic purism that misleads Dreyfus. It assumes either that there is nothing non-propositional (which I find untenable for reasons discussed throughout this dissertation) or that if there is, it must exist in a compartmentalized form. It is to reassert the assumptions of Dreyfus’s original puzzle rather than accept that the body integrates our various capacities in order to grant us access to an intelligibly unified world. My initial response then is similar. We ought to take seriously the reality of our separate capacities and activities, but do so without the dualistic framework that makes it so difficult to see how these capacities interact.

I find this problem analogous to the interaction between various forms of speech. On the one hand, I believe we level important distinctions and consequently mischaracterize the elements of speech if we reduce everything to propositions. Showing that we can embed imperatives inside of declaratives does not reveal that the two are essentially one and the same form of speech. Focusing on the context-independent truth-claim of contextual speech acts is often appropriate, but we need to recognize that it is also to prescind away from what are in fact exigent aspects of language—voice, indexicals, pragmatic force, normative transactions, elements of etiquette, motivational structure, etc.

Thus, it is important not to reduce speech to propositions. On the other hand, while there are genuine and difficult puzzles that remain, it is clear that the various parts of

speech play legitimate inferential roles within the space of reasons (e.g., imperatives license truth-claims and vice versa). Similarly, as we've seen in numerous examples, language does not work exclusively within the space of reasons (or perhaps its more appropriate to say that the space of reasons traffics in more than linguistic transactions). Language is also efficacious in terms of its direct bodily impact—on our emotions, physical readiness, actions, perceptions, ability to cope, etc. We hear and bodily respond to meanings in normatively (in)appropriate ways. It is likewise a matter of fact that we draw justified inferences from unreflective actions, even when our retroactive access to those actions is severely restricted (e.g., minimally, we infer responsibility).

Again, all of this is to say that we cope within a domain of intelligibility co-constituted in terms of our background perceptual modalities, skillful dispositions, and conceptual capacities. While we both access and take up the world in multiple ways, it is the same, multiply available world in each case.

Second, the nonconceptualist might object to my conclusions concerning how language functions to reinforce coping. Specifically, a critic might deny that language in fact attaches to or expresses the world we cope with when fully absorbed and acting in-flow. Rather than accept that articulate coaches in fact express the phenomena that engaged athletes experience, one might instead claim that the coach is more literally a cheerleader. That is, one might adopt a sort of pragmatic expressivism. Linguistic instructions on how to hit a high-speed curve ball might amount to nothing more than elaborate forms of encouragement. Hence such instructions are frequently metaphorical or otherwise imprecise. Coaches linguistically motivate batters to practice until they become bodily attuned to the nonconceptual elements of experience that allow them to skillfully cope with

curve balls. The example might be extended, to claim that much of what we think we articulate of our coping experiences are actually empty sorts of ostension and psychological motivation rather than genuine expressions of what remains nonconceptual.

Again, this challenge raises too many issues to deal with here, but I will offer two responses. First, is to point out the diverse and richly developed nature of using language to put speakers in touch with the reality we deal with in high-speed situations. Reducing what are often times highly developed linguistic engagements to mere cheering strikes me as crude. It ignores the variable skill involved. Coaches improve their ability to coach, not simply by becoming more and more charismatic, but by getting better and better at expressing to players how to perceive the relevant phenomena and what they must do in very difficult, very high-speed scenarios like hitting curve balls. Second, we ought to recognize that much of language is similarly metaphorical and imprecise, including language used in more pedestrian, slow-speed activities. Abstract and metaphorical speech is an effective and important way in which we express essential aspects of our lives and activities. To claim that in order to count as genuine articulation, language must operate in rigidly precise, non-metaphorical ways is to recreate the mistakes of logical positivism.<sup>298</sup>

#### **IV. Summary**

In this section I've attempted to show that experience generally and the motor intentional content involved in skillful coping specifically is in fact conceptual. We started by acknowledging the uncontroversial fact that for mature human beings concepts often times pervade perception. We perceive intelligible aspects of our environment, which is (again, at

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<sup>298</sup> I will return to this objection in Chapter Six.

least often) a function of our conceptual repertoire. Importantly, this fact entails the possibility of conceptual capacities functioning within the intentional arc of human perception. This alone is enough to show that for humans, perception is (at least often) a different *kind* of thing than it is for animals. Our having concepts changes not only the *what* but also the *way* in which we perceive our environment. Nevertheless, one might maintain that human access to the environment is bifurcated into two ontologically distinct categories. That is, it might be the case that we make use of our perceptual capacities to access the world in two separate and distinct ways: practically and conceptually. While this is a consistent position, I tried to show that phenomenologically it is an implausible one.

Alternatively, I sketched a picture of human perception wherein the skillful dispositions inherent to our practical coping and the conceptual capacities inherent in reflective or linguistic activities are always both at play. Making use of Dreyfus's discussion of gradualism in breakdown I highlighted the fact that the degree to which one's practical or conceptual understanding colors one's experience can be seen as a function of the task one is trying to accomplish and the obstacles that might arise rather than as a function of distinct capacities engaged and the distinct objects these capacities make available. That is, both conceptual and practical capacities are holistically involved in the perceptual disclosure of a situation, and the intelligibility made possible by each is conspicuous to the degree called for by the experience and the goals we take up with regard to that experience.

The plausibility of this position is related to the plausibility of Dreyfus's own holistic integration of skillful dispositions and perception. As a corrective to the intellectualist excesses of the tradition, Dreyfus emphasizes those experiences wherein the practical intelligibility of a situation is as conspicuous as is the absence of reflection. Consequently,

he overlooks the fact that his same arguments for the operation of skillful dispositions in the intelligible disclosure of all experience (including conspicuously reflective experience) are also available to the conceptualist. An alternative that allows for the mutual integration of both skillful dispositions and conceptuality within all experience is more true to the varied and multivalent nature of experience generally.

Furthermore, this alternative makes sense of breakdown switches from practical coping to reflective engagement. It accounts for the often fluid and gradual involvement of directed conceptual understanding. Likewise, it makes sense of why reflection (potentially) works in breakdown. Rather than coping for the sake of coping, so that reflection can function only as a means to more fluid coping, human experience is teleological, and we skillfully employ those capacities—already involved in the intelligible disclosure of the situation—called for in order to fluidly accomplish the tasks in which we are engaged. If the hammer with which I am hammering fails to function, then reflection may be called upon—not to disclose something new, but to focus in on what is already disclosed in the manner proper to one's conceptual capacities. In doing so, however, I do not take up a new object—the conceptual hammer. Rather, I take up the same tool, but do so according to the conceptual possibilities already inherent within the disclosure of the situation.

The plausibility of this alternative and the inherent conceptuality of even practical coping are made more conspicuous by looking at the teleological structure of every meaningful human situation. The goals implicit within human activity open us onto a world of practical affordances. This is another example of the holism at work within perception. For humans, however, these goals are not simply practical, but also conceptually articulate. This is readily apparent when the life and goals one has adopted are a matter of explicit

conceptual activity (e.g., an explicit marriage covenant) or when the task one engages in is structured by conceptual rules (e.g., chess). It is also apparent in the distinct nature of the affordances available to humans (e.g., intimacy). Thus while the affordance itself is experienced as a pragmatic solicitation within a situation, *what* is being afforded—just as *which* kind of life one might choose to live—is entirely dependent on our being conceptual animals. Additionally, we saw that these features of our situatedness remain susceptible to the exercise of our conceptual capacities in terms of our remaining accountable to rational activity—in the form of inference, criticism and refinement. Conceptuality is a necessary part of the teleological structure of human situatedness and of what such situations make possible.

This means that Dreyfus's Refrigerator Light worry is a red herring—at least with regard to the conceptual nature of experience. The conceptuality of experience is not a matter of whether reflecting on the experience changes or distorts the practical nature of the experience—maybe it always does, at least in terms of the practical motivation inherent within experience. However, if I am right then our conceptual capacities were already operational in the disclosure of one's surroundings, even if in the midst of our engagement we only take up the practically disclosed features of our environment. This can be seen in the fact that the very nature of the experience is only possible on the conditions of our being conceptual beings. It can also be seen in the intimate relationship between how we are solicited and our (perhaps presently inconspicuous) conceptual grasp. Finally, it is seen in the continued responsiveness and interaction between our conceptual understanding and our practical grip on our situation.

## V. Conceptual standing practices: a refrain

By way of refrain and illustration of how my position moves the debate between Dreyfus and McDowell forward, I will look at one final phenomenon that figures large in their most recent exchange.<sup>299</sup> Dreyfus notes that “human beings are *from the start* absorbed into a holistic web of interconnected meanings that they pick up directly by imitation,” that is, without reflective mediation or any explicit understanding of a rule or norm governing their behavior.<sup>300</sup> He lists as examples things like distance standing practices, gender norms, and cultural child-rearing practices. I will call these ‘transparent social practices.’

Often times, we’re not even aware that we engage in these sorts of normatively meaningful and culturally mediated behaviors such as distance standing practices. “We are not aware of what we are doing, nor were our parents who passed this complex skill on to us aware that they had it.” Nevertheless, despite its transparency, this form of social normativity directly impacts the way in which we go about things—it is efficaciously at work in our practices and world-disclosure. “As long as we stay absorbed this skill opens us to being drawn to cope with ever-new situations.”<sup>301</sup> For example, Dreyfus describes gender norms that draw us “to act in a way that is recognized and responded to as masculine and feminine, and, indeed, we are drawn to deal in a culturally appropriate way with everything that is.”<sup>302</sup> Some of these cultural values may be, but many often are not, operative at the level of reflection. Nevertheless, they are unquestionably operative at the level of experience, training not only our comportment but likewise our sense of a situation and what is or is not appropriate—even in new situations. Once again, through careful

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<sup>299</sup> See Schear (2013): Chapters One and Two.

<sup>300</sup> 2013: 25.

<sup>301</sup> 23.

<sup>302</sup> 25.

phenomenology Dreyfus has drawn our attention to distinctive, meaningful human modes of comportment that operate *sans* reflection or appeal to explicit rules, even across generations. In typical fashion, he takes this phenomenon “as a striking counterexample to [McDowell’s] claims that *all* distinctively human activity is pervaded by conceptuality.”<sup>303</sup>

In likewise typical fashion, McDowell denies the relevance of such phenomena to his work and conceptualist claims. While acknowledging things such as distance standing practices and gender norms as genuinely unique modes of normative human comportment (“of course these dispositions are culturally formed”<sup>304</sup>), McDowell denies that his Pervasiveness Thesis<sup>305</sup> concerns all distinctively human *activity*. Rather, it concerns all human *experience*. He then goes on to dismiss social norms as form of comportment operating below personal-level experience. “If someone is doing something that she does not know she is doing, as can of course happen, her doing *that* falls outside the scope of the pervasiveness thesis as it applies to acting.”<sup>306</sup> Consequently, he sees such comportment as irrelevant to his claims. This form of human normativity may or may not be nonconceptual; but either way, it is orthogonal to an account of agential perception and experience and, so McDowell claims, orthogonal to his conceptualism.

Both philosophers fail to grasp what is at play in these practices. As we’ve seen before, Dreyfus’s drive to carefully distinguish our meaningful, embodied practices from our reflective ones causes him to overlook their connection and the conceptual nature our embodied grasp. As I will show, he makes the same mistake with regard to transparent social practices. McDowell, on the other hand, having elegantly worked out a notion of

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<sup>303</sup> 26.

<sup>304</sup> 2013: 51.

<sup>305</sup> I.e., his claim that human experience is conceptual all the way out.

<sup>306</sup> 2013: 50.

pervasive conceptuality is prone to ignore the significance of our meaningful embodied engagements, often by assuming their conceptuality and orthogonal significance (as he does with skillful coping) or dismissing them as “outside the scope of the pervasiveness thesis” (as he does transparent social norms). I have argued that while he is right with regard to skillful coping—it is a genuinely conceptual phenomenon—I have also tried to show that his quick appropriation flattens the rich texture of experience without fully accounting for its conceptual nature. Additionally, McDowell’s move to bring skillful coping under the umbrella of conceptuality runs the risk of incorrectly attributing propositionality to experiences that are, as Dreyfus correctly notes, non-propositional in nature.

With regard to our transparent social norms, McDowell is similarly quick to judge in a manner that preserves his pervasiveness thesis intact. In this case, however, he is simply wrong. What’s more, his quick dismissal misses an opportunity to further clarify the conceptual nature of our embodied engagement. Once again, the phenomena themselves call for us to recognize the merits of both philosophers. As I will show, the phenomenon of transparent social norms reveals the integrated nature of our conceptual capacities with our perceptual modalities and skillful dispositions.

McDowell’s case for dismissing transparent social norms rests on his claim that the practices themselves and the role that they play do not operate at the level of first-personal, agential experience. There are two problems with his dismissal on these grounds. First, his claim that transparent social norms do not operate at the agential level of experience simply misses the phenomenon. There is a sense in which it is correct to say that our being culturally sensitive to, say, distance-standing practices is an example of acting without being aware of what we are doing. The phenomenon of distance-standing,

however, shows up in numerous ways *at the level of experience*. It does so, however, without showing up as an articulated reason, which is perhaps what leads McDowell to miss them.<sup>307</sup> Instead, our distance-standing practices are experienced directly as bodily affordances—a feeling of discomfort or the urge to step back when persons are too close and the opposite when they are too far. The discomfort and solicitation to move in order to relieve the tension of the situation *just is* what distance-standing practices amount to, and our experiencing such tension, together with the skillful manner in which we act toward a resolution, operates at the level of experience. What’s more, as Dreyfus notes, such practices open us onto the world in meaningful ways. That is, our experience of the world is structured according to our embodied sensitivity to these norms. Thus, for example, distance-standing practices result in our experience and understanding of things like intimacy or threat.

One might respond that our discomfort on account of proximity when speaking to people from, say France, or our experience of intimacy is conceptual, while the distance-standing norm itself is not. That is, one’s regulation of comportment on how close one stands to others is no more normative than, say, that one digests food after it enters one’s stomach or sweats when one’s body reaches a certain temperature.<sup>308</sup> In other words, one

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<sup>307</sup> That is, this appears to be a case in which Dreyfus’s criticisms stick: McDowell’s overly intellectualist focus causes him to miss the operations of an important, embodied phenomenon that is relevant to McDowell’s work.

<sup>308</sup> Note that this response is essentially a denial of Dreyfus’s characterization of transparent social norms and skillful coping more generally. It is critical to Dreyfus that our engaged, bodily coping with our environment is itself normative, even if one is not capable of reflecting on what those norms are. That is, for Dreyfus normativity is an embodied and not just a reflective or conceptual phenomenon; see (2002). The point of this objection, however, does not hang on this fact since one must explain how physical comportment gives rise to normative experience whether or not one accepts the possibility of a Dreyfusian nonconceptual but normative motor-intentionality.

could respond that while the agential experience of discomfort or intimacy is conceptual, the comportment that gives rise to this experience is not agential and hence not conceptual. This objection, however, recreates the mysterious dualism that McDowell eschews in his debate with Dreyfus and against which he brings his Pervasiveness Thesis to bear.<sup>309</sup> That is, given McDowell's Pervasiveness Thesis—that all experience is conceptual—this objection leaves one with the challenge of resolving how an embodied, non-conceptual norm (distance-standing) gives rise to a conceptual experience (one's sense of intimacy). Such an account, however, would be inconsistent with the rest of McDowell's work.

More importantly, however, this objection misses what actually takes place in our enacting transparent social practices. As already noted, one's sensitivity to a felt tension or experience of intimacy is not separate from the norm; rather, they are the norm at work. Even more importantly, however, if McDowell were to take this approach, he would find himself vulnerable to Dreyfus's criticisms more generally. This is because Dreyfus is correct to offer transparent social practices as an example of the phenomenon of skillful coping that is the centerpiece of his attack. Dreyfus's phenomenon of skillful coping concerns the way in which we become bodily attuned to some appropriate way of perceiving and operating, and consequently the world shows up in a certain manner, soliciting us to certain actions in an unreflective manner. For example, if I am a skillful pedestrian, then a downtown environment shows up in a particular manner—certain features like crosswalks and sidewalks are conspicuous, and my body is unreflectively solicited to make use

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<sup>309</sup> To be clear, in *Mind and World* McDowell offers his conceptualism as a way of avoiding the nature-norm dualism prevalent in contemporary philosophy. Nevertheless, he uses it in a similar manner to avoid Dreyfus's coping-reflecting or practical-conceptual dualism in the debate. For example, see (2007a): 349-350.

of them and avoid traffic.<sup>310</sup> It's not clear what distinction McDowell sees between the experience of the normatively attuned pedestrian and the normatively attuned distance-stander.

One might be tempted to defend McDowell by claiming that the difference is a matter of reflection. That is, one might claim that the pedestrian is reflectively aware of the rules, or that at some point the pedestrian became sensitized by reflectively applying the rules. This move, however, would be to concede that conceptual capacities only operate in reflection—something McDowell is keen to deny. Conceptuality, as we've seen, is not a matter of reflection, nor do we need a reflective grasp of our situation in order for our conceptual capacities to be operational in our grasp of that situation.

Take for example two persons, both skillfully adept in our American distance-standing practices. Gaebriel was raised an American, as were his parents, and has never been reflectively aware that he is an attuned distance-stander, though the attendant (dis-)comfort in conversation is a very real part of his experience. Magdeleine on the other hand is from France and first came to America as a student at Berkeley. It was only after taking Dreyfus's class that she realized why everyone always backed away from her in conversation. Fortunately, a perceptive T.A. in the class helped her to recognize that she ought to stand at approximately arm's-length. She reflectively applied this rule, and by the second semester no longer needed to reflect, but instead operated exactly as any other American (she now even feels disoriented and has to readjust when she travels back home). Now if McDowell were to appeal to the above objection, then Magdeleine would be a *conceptual* distance-stander, and distance standing for her, like the norms of skillfully

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<sup>310</sup> Note how one usually does not reflect that stepping out into traffic is unwise; rather, one's body feels an increasing tension as one moves closer, is literally repulsed by traffic.

driving, would be a matter of agential (though unreflective) experience. Gaebriel, on the other hand, would *not* be a conceptual distance-stander, nor would distance standing be for him a feature of agential experience. This seems implausible. By the second semester, both Gaebriel and Magdeleine are skillfully operating according to the local distance-standing practices and doing so in the same unreflective manner. It makes no sense, then, to claim that the one acts conceptually while the other's actions are outside the scope of conceptuality.

If McDowell is to be consistent, then the criterion ought not to be whether one "is doing something that she does not know she is doing" (e.g., acting according to a norm of which she's not reflectively aware)—a common feature of our conceptual experience. The question of whether our transparent social practices are conceptual is (contra both McDowell and Dreyfus) not a question of whether we are aware that we are doing something normatively significant in enacting those practices. For example, if asked why I walk in such a feminine way, I might be genuinely puzzled, unaware that there is something particularly feminine in my gait, without this having direct bearing on the question of the conceptuality of my practice. Rather, McDowell ought to keep the criterion at whether or not the experience is subject to rational criticism or amenable to discursive articulation. As our example of Gaebriel and Magdeleine illustrates, distance-standing practices, like our other transparent social practices, are both. We saw in our discussion above that it is not the case that in transparent social practices we are merely acting in accord with a rule or norm. Rather, the nature of our behavior is itself rule- or norm-governed in a rationally responsive way. We stand as we do because this is how we (bodily) feel that we ought to stand. Distance-standing behaviors are likewise responsive to criticism and reflective

reform, even if they are not qua transparent social practice a matter of reflection, and even if we cannot optimally enact them via reflection. Consequently, distance standing is capable of being articulated as the norm that it is. As Dreyfus notes, “making explicit our background assumptions and practices is the job of consciousness raising groups that try, for example, to list the features of what it is to be feminine or masculine in our culture.” Importantly, such consciousness raising groups are often accurate. That is, there is no in-principle barrier to their making the social norms that are in fact governing our behavior explicit, even if we are never completely successful in these endeavors, and even if our success is always a matter of degree.<sup>311</sup>

Importantly, this is true whether or not a given norm is amenable to propositional articulation. It’s not clear that the specific examples Dreyfus uses in fact resist such articulation, but for the sake of argument we can assume they might. It might be the case that the complex and aggregate comportment at play in cultural negotiating styles are such as to be irreducible to a full propositional specification. It is undoubtedly the case that none of us are competent to fully articulate the host of contextual cues that holistically constitute the given style that we embody or to which we skillfully respond. Nevertheless, that style is linguistically incarnate at the negotiating table, and explicit coaching and training is efficacious in preparing and orienting novice diplomats to be able to recognize and successfully cope with these styles. Discursive practices give us a means of normatively

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<sup>311</sup> Remember that Dreyfus also acknowledges the ability of social scientists to articulate the rules or other norms governing some of our transparent social practices. While he is right that we do not respond to these norms as articulated norms, our behavior is nonetheless structured by those norms and is responsive to their normative force. Again, such practices are not merely in accord with norms, they are norm-governed. This fact manifests their conceptual nature in part because our ability to be so governed is a feature of our rational capacities.

engaging with skillful practices, even if these cannot be (fully) propositionally articulated.<sup>312</sup>

Just as importantly, these norms, whether or not they are made fully explicit, are vulnerable to criticism. That is, consciousness-raising groups or efforts can be successful—they can result in a rational alteration of the norms that our practices instantiate. We might fail to articulate successfully why exactly someone's deportment toward minorities is morally or culturally offensive—and yet be entirely correct that it is. What's more, explicit reflection on the situation in the wake of criticism (whether or not that criticism is completely articulate) can be efficacious in getting one to change his or her attunement and act in ways that are more appropriate to the norms being endorsed.

At this point, Dreyfus might object that my examples are biased, that I'm ignoring the fact that we begin to adopt transparent social practices long before we are linguistically competent animals responsive to rational criticism. He uses the striking difference noted by developmental psychologists in the 1970s between American and Japanese child rearing practices and the subsequent cultural difference manifest by pre-linguistic infants. By three or four months infants begin manifesting a sort of embodied cultural learning. A Japanese infant's experience of being quiet and content or an American infant's experience of being aggressive and interactive is neither amenable to discursive articulation nor is it responsive to rational criticism. Rather, their development of a cultural style is entirely bodily rather than conceptual in nature.

This is undoubtedly true. The objection, however, has no bearing on the conceptuality of transparent social practices in mature humans. There are numerous

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<sup>312</sup> As the example shows, it is also the case that important transparent social norms are only instantiated via discursive practices like verbal negotiation.

behaviors that are descriptively similar (perhaps identical) between infants and mature humans, without this fact implying a (non-)conceptual similarity. For example, the fact of an infant's non- or pre-conceptual experience of anger and hunger is not an argument that anger and hunger are conceptually inarticulate in normal adults. For adults, hunger can be an injustice, an inconvenience, a means of religious transcendence, a motivation, a punishment, etc. This is not true of the infant. Rather, the significant contrast in terms of richness and normative diversity between the embodied experiences of adults and infants argues that there is indeed an important qualitative change, even in experiences that remain descriptively similar. Rather than an objection, this can be taken as evidence that part of our development into mature rational animals is an integration of our conceptual capacities with our perceptual modalities and skillful dispositions.

As argued above, our in-principle ability to articulate transparent social practices, their vulnerability to criticism, and the way in which the norms themselves are operative within our experience, is a function of the conceptual nature of these practices. In other words, transparent social practices are merely another example of the way in which a conceptual understanding can function within our world-disclosive coping practices and attune our unreflective, embodied grasp on our environment. This fact once again reveals the tight integration of our conceptuality, our skillful dispositions, and their mutually-informed operations within our perceptual access to the world.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSIONS

Let one name this whole disposition of the human being's forces however one wishes: understanding, reason, taking-awareness, etc. It is indifferent to me, so long as one does not assume these names to be separate forces or mere higher levels of the animal forces. It is the "*whole organization of all human forces; the whole domestic economy of his sensuous and cognizing, of his cognizing and willing, nature.*" . . . The difference is not in levels or the addition of forces, but in a quite different sort of orientation and unfolding of all powers.

-Johann Gottfried Herder<sup>313</sup>

A motivating tension in the philosophy of perception is the proportional relationship between phenomenologically and epistemologically adequate theories. It sometimes seems that the more phenomenologically accurate one's account of perception, the less epistemologically adequate it is, and vice versa. It is easy to see the genesis of the Dreyfus-McDowell debate in just these terms. Dreyfus leads a salvo against McDowell's theory on the grounds that it simply doesn't get the phenomenon of absorbed coping right. If what I have argued is correct, then the debate evolves to become more than a familiar battle in new terms. Rather, it discloses the possibility of a phenomenologically adequate perceptual epistemology, one that accounts for unreflective coping experience. Making this case has been the work of this dissertation. Ultimately, I have presented a phenomenologically sensitive, non-propositional form of total content conceptualism. Our skillful engagement with the world operates along the basic lines of Dreyfus's account, with the critical addition

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<sup>313</sup> 2002: 82-83.

that, as McDowell's indicates, our capacity for language effects a sea-change in the nature of perception and experience. Normativity as such is not inherently conceptual. Normatively meaningful action in linguistically competent human adults, however, is. While there is still much to say about the difference between unreflectively fielding a hard-hit ground ball and reflecting on such an experience, the nature of perceptual experience is such that there is no need to account for an ontological transformation at the level (or in the wake) of perception. Rather, the pervasive nature of language's integration with our perceptual modalities and other skillful capacities renders normative perception and action conceptual.

In what remains, I want to further clarify what this form of conceptuality amounts to and will undertake to do so in two ways. First, I will offer a restatement of my considered position and illustrate this position with variations on the Frisbee catching example at play in the debate itself. Second, I will consider and respond to several potential objections to my account. Having done so, I will conclude with a brief look at the possibilities for future research that this account opens up.

### **I. Conceptually catching a Frisbee**

In his printed response to Dreyfus's criticism, McDowell makes use of an example of a woman walking through a park who, seeing a Frisbee coming toward her, catches it "on the spur of the moment." McDowell claims that her performing this action is conceptual:

The point of saying that the rational agent, unlike the dog, is realizing a concept in doing what she does is that her doing, under a specification that captures the content of the practical concept that she is realizing, comes

within the scope of her practical rationality—even if only in that, if asked why she caught the frisbee, she would answer “No particular reason; I just felt like it”.<sup>314</sup>

Dreyfus disputes the claim. For him, the phenomenological lack of both a self-conscious ego and a rational motivation behind action in relevant situations of coping like the Frisbee catch reveal the misguided nature of McDowell’s claim that such actions are conceptual.<sup>315</sup>

I think we can get clearer about this particular case and the general fault-line between conceptual and non-conceptual activity by considering a number of specific variations on this example. Before considering these variations, it will be helpful to review the criteria for conceptual activity I set out in Chapters Four and Five.

Following McDowell, I endorse the discursive articulability of an experience as a key criterion of its conceptuality—a criterion for whether or not such experiences can play an epistemic role. As discussed in Chapter Five, agential experience is intentional, norm-governed experience (as opposed to behavior that is merely in accord with a norm). Those actions and experiences that can be judged as agential are also in-principle amenable to linguistic expression. As we saw, this is true even when in actual fact we are incapable of articulating the relevant experience (e.g., when the relevant action is too quick for thought, when we lack full retrospective access to the experience, or when we are linguistically incompetent to non-demonstratively articulate it). Thus the reason that in-principle discursive articulability works as a criterion is that it provides an answer to the key questions: is the experience in question norm-governed and can it consequently play a normative role within the space of reasons?

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<sup>314</sup> 2007b: 368-369. See also (2013): §4.

<sup>315</sup> See 2007b: 374-376 and (2013): §5.

In claiming that agential experience is indeed apt to play such a role, we can distinguish between a strong and a weak thesis.

**Strong Thesis:** *all* agential experience *as it is experienced* already functions in an epistemic role, e.g. by licensing an epistemic move or by being propositional or otherwise conceptually articulate in the experience itself.

**Weak Thesis:** agential experience need not be propositional or already be functioning in an epistemic role, but is in-principle capable of being subsumed under our epistemic practices, e.g. by being taken up in language.

My conceptualist position is an endorsement of the weaker thesis. I have argued, in agreement with Dreyfus, that many of our experiences are de facto incapable of playing an epistemic role (e.g., because of an insufficient retrospective grasp of what we've done). Additionally, much of our experience as experienced is non-propositional in nature (some of it is so in-principle). That is, much of experience does not fit the requirements of the Strong Thesis. This, however, does not keep these experiences from being properly understood as conceptual according to the Weak Thesis.

I have supported this claim with three basic arguments. First, language is one of the skillful capacities by which we disclose the world, and as such experience is what it is in part on account of our being linguistic animals. Second and consequently, conceptuality not only changes the nature of our perception, but also changes the ways in which we are readily receptive to experience. We are primed to be perceptually receptive in a manner that entails the in-principle linguistic expressibility of experience. Just as vision is always potentially amenable to motor-activity, so too is it amenable to linguistic communication—even if it is never taken up as such. Language is in every instance potentially rich enough to

engage with or articulate experience, including non-propositional forms of experience (even if in practice we do so poorly). Additionally, language enriches the kinds of experience we're capable of having—it is just as involved in the intentional arc of disclosure as our other skillful capacities. Finally, there is a mutually affective relationship between agential experience and the space of reasons, such that experience is always to some degree responsive to reasons and can likewise play a role in the space of reasons (e.g., by licensing inference).

Given this picture of conceptuality, we can turn to McDowell's Frisbee example in order to explore the nature of our conceptual experience. Consider the following variations on McDowell's example:

**Case 1:** Walking through a park, a woman catches a Frisbee hurtling toward her without noticing. Her friend says, "Hey, what did you just do?" while pointing at the Frisbee. The woman looks at the Frisbee in total surprise, not having realized that she's just caught a Frisbee (i.e., she's aware that's she's walking through the park, but entirely misses both the fact that while doing so an object flew toward her and also that she in fact caught it).

**Case 2:** Walking through a park, a woman catches a Frisbee randomly hurtling toward her without really "seeing" the Frisbee. Rather she vaguely perceives and immediately responds to a phenomenal disturbance caused by the incoming Frisbee, reaching up and catching it. Afterwards she stares stupidly at the Frisbee in surprise, and is only able to vaguely piece together in a retroactive manner that she must've unreflectively caught the Frisbee—something she has never done before.

**Case 3:** Now imagine she's a Jason Bourne-type. Again, she doesn't really "see" the Frisbee. Rather, she vaguely perceives and immediately responds to a phenomenal disturbance caused by the incoming Frisbee, reaching up and catching it. In this instance, however, the Frisbee was not on a trajectory to hit her, and the manner in which she snagged it was a remarkably skillful achievement. As it turns out, she was in her pre-amnesia life a highly skilled, champion Frisbee player and her body has just responded in the skillful manner in which it was trained.

**Case 4:** This is McDowell's case. A woman responds spontaneously, without acting for a reason, by catching an incoming Frisbee. It would be incorrect to say she failed to perceive and reach out for the incoming Frisbee (or perhaps for an unidentified projectile or in response to a disturbance in her phenomenal field), even though she did not have any specific reason for doing so.

**Case 5:** A woman is playing Frisbee with her friend in the park in order to relieve stress. Her "mind" is not on the game, however, being utterly distracted by the anxiety of applying to academic jobs. Nevertheless her friend applauds a truly superb catch, awakening her from her self-absorbed "slumber," and she is only able to vaguely, retroactively recall what it is that she's just done.

I believe that Dreyfus would deny that any of these cases are conceptual. He would, however, acknowledge the meaningful, motor-intentional (i.e., non-brutely causal) nature of Cases 3-5, likely even of Cases 1-2. McDowell, on the other hand, would clearly attribute

conceptuality to Cases 4-5, while denying the conceptuality of Case 1. It's not clear to me that McDowell's account gives us adequate resources to determine Cases 2-3. For reasons similar to those discussed in Chapter Five concerning transparent social practices, it seems to me that Cases 2-5 are all agential experiences, as is Case 1 properly understood. Consequently, if McDowell's Pervasiveness Thesis is to survive the sorts of attacks that Dreyfus brings against it, he needs to be able to account for the conceptuality of these cases. The weak conceptual thesis and account summarized above allows us to do just that.

In order to make sense of what is at stake in each example, we need to start with Case 1. As written, Case 1 is ambiguous between being a merely reflexive action and a normatively informed one. That is, we can understand Case 1 as a brutally causal, hard-wired sort of event. The woman's reflex to catch the Frisbee in this situation might be analogous to one's leg kicking in response to a tap on the knee. Call this Case 1a. On the other hand, while the woman is completely unaware of the action she has performed, it might nonetheless depend on her normative understanding of things like projectiles, their mundane possibility in places like parks, the appropriateness or possibility of catching them, etc. As we saw in Chapter Five, catching the Frisbee in this scenario is a form of differential responsiveness that is normatively distinct from one's differential responsiveness to heat manifest by one's sweating. Call this Case 1b.

Case 1a seems to me to be both obviously implausible and obviously non-agential. Nor does it contribute anything to our present discussion beyond helping us to mark the difference between what is and is not relevantly normative behavior. Case 1b on the other hand is an important example of the sort that Dreyfus emphasizes. This is difficult to see on account of the implausibility of catching a Frisbee without noticing. As Dreyfus continually

urges, however, we commonly perform other normatively informed activities without noticing. We can imagine a perfectly plausible scenario in which our Frisbee catching woman has a specific pocket in which she always places her keys, and then imagine her getting out of her car at the park while trying to juggle a drink, a Frisbee, her keys, a bag and a newly purchased copy of *Mind and World*. She walks a few steps, gets the Frisbee and book inside the bag and slung over her shoulder, takes a sip, and realizes that she is no longer holding her keys. After looking around and not seeing them on the ground, she puts her hand inside of her special pocket and is surprised to find her keys, having no memory whatsoever of putting them where they were meant to go.

Case 1b is importantly different than Cases 2-5 because the woman is entirely unaware in the midst of the action that she is in fact doing something. In this sense, Case 1b is analogous to the transparent social practices (e.g., distance standing) discussed in Chapter Five, and according to my account is conceptual in nature for similar reasons. What distinguishes Case 1b from Case 5 is the sharpness of the woman's retrospective, reflective access to what she was about. Like other transparent social practices, the woman's action is norm-governed and subject to rational criticism or reflective reform.

For example, after catching the Frisbee we can imagine the woman seeing a dog running at her, and then being disgusted with herself for having caught an unsanitary dog's toy. Following such an event, she might successfully train herself to always (and unreflectively) duck rather than catch Frisbees. A more likely example, one can imagine the woman changing which pocket is her special key pocket. As both of these show, one cannot properly describe *what* the woman has done without reference to her linguistically articulable (i.e., conceptual) understanding—she has unfortunately touched or ducked an

unsanitary object, or determined that her special pocket is no longer appropriate. This is true even if the woman is incapable in the specific scenario of first-personally describing what she has done. This does not, however, change the fact that the specific normative richness of what she has done (e.g., avoided something believed to be unsanitary) is directly dependent on her conceptual capacities, nor the in-principle accuracy of linguistically describing those actions or according them epistemic merit.

Case 5 is similar to Chuck Knoblauch's fielding a ground ball or the chess master playing lightning chess and is the most straightforward. The woman is not paying reflective attention to the Frisbee catch, but as we've already seen conceptual activity does not require reflective monitoring. What matters is that she is aware of what she is doing,<sup>316</sup> is acting for reasons she can articulate,<sup>317</sup> and her activity is genuinely responsive to criticism or to changes in her thinking about how the activity *ought* to be performed. (As we saw in Chapter Five with transparent social practices, this does not mean that she needs to be aware that she's actually engaged in the practice, so long as the practice is genuinely normative, shapes her first-personal experience, and she is in-principle capable of being made aware that she does in fact engage in the practice.) She need not respond to determinate features capable of being brought under reflection so long as it is true that she responds in a manner that she believes is appropriate to the sort of activity she intends to

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<sup>316</sup> That is, the first-personal nature of the experience does not require self-conscious monitoring. Rather, first-personal presentation is a manner of experience itself. Dan Zahavi (2013) has a helpful discussion of this aspect of motor-intentional activity in the context of the Dreyfus-McDowell debate.

<sup>317</sup> By "acting for reasons she can articulate," I'm referring to the fact that the woman, as stipulated in Case 5, has reflectively determined to play Frisbee and is acting accordingly. As we saw in previous chapters and as noted here, while this means that her actions are intentional and norm-governed, it does not mean that her actual movements come in response to specific or reflectively accessible rules or determinate, reflectively isolatable perceptual features.

engage in. This is true even if her ability to say exactly how that is so is impoverished (e.g., even if unable to articulate why it is that jumping and twisting in *that manner* was the optimal way to make the catch).

We've already noted McDowell's reasons for considering Case 4 to be conceptual. The motor-intentional action—an unreflective reaching out to catch the incoming Frisbee—is largely the same as it is in Case 5, the key difference being that in Case 4 she is not already intentionally engaging in a game of Frisbee. McDowell calls it a limiting case of rationality—one where the woman acknowledges the intentional nature of her action and consequently the legitimacy of someone asking her why she did so, even though she doesn't have any reason for having done so. As McDowell, notes, her response of "No particular reason; I just felt like it" is importantly different than a response of "Oh, I didn't know I was doing that."<sup>318</sup> This is a key distinction between Case 1 (a or b) and Case 4.

My own account of the conceptual nature of this activity—appropriating as it does Dreyfus's phenomenological insights on the nature of world disclosure<sup>319</sup>—allows us to say more than this. Catching a Frisbee is culturally (normatively) mediated according to one's understanding and familiarity with doing such things. It is easy to imagine worlds where flying Frisbee-shaped projectiles are both relatively common and play meaningful roles as (for example) warnings, omens, gifts, FBI drone attacks, or the like. Consequently, even when actions are descriptively identical (i.e., folks catch the Frisbee), an individual agent's specific action might be meaningfully differentiated on account of its normatively laden significance. One might be spontaneously defending oneself, catching a Frisbee, receiving a

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<sup>318</sup> 2013: 49.

<sup>319</sup> See Chapter Two for a detailed discussion of the phenomenon of *world*. Also, as Dreyfus notes, one's situation actually shows up differently according to one's sensitivity to the different possibilities at play; see Chapter Five for more details.

gift, winning a contest, defiantly facing one's fate, etc. The normative significance and actual nature of the action in each of these Case 4-type events sets them apart from Case 1a while manifesting a similarity to Case 1b. Case 4 is an agential experience because the nature of what is done is dependent on an agent's normative embedding within a world.

While one is not always competent to adequately express exactly what one does in such Case 4 situations, another critical way in which to differentiate these experiences is to *express* what it is that one has experienced. Again, in response to a query about what one has just done, a superstitious Case 4 agent might respond along the lines of, "Well, it looks as if I've just saved our lives..."<sup>320</sup> Furthermore, one's action (and its expression) can be criticized as inadequate, appropriate, transgressive, prodigious, etc., all according to the background understanding involved in the execution of the activity. Importantly, in the wake of this criticism, the way in which one's body comports itself in relevant future scenarios can (reflectively or unreflectively) shift in response to that criticism so as to be primed to respond differently.

All of this helps us to make sense of the conceptual nature of Case 3. First, however, we need to further distinguish this case from its neighbors. One might imagine Case 3 as simply a specific kind of Case 1b. Unlike Case 1b, however, the agent in Case 3 is in fact first-personally aware of her actions. She is aware that she is meaningfully responding to the disturbance in her phenomenal field, even though she is retroactively surprised at the skill, precision and nature of that response. It is in this sense agential. It is importantly different from Case 4, however, in that the agent is not capable, even in principle, of

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<sup>320</sup> Note in Case 4 that while the agent does not *act for* a reason or reflect in the midst of the action, it is nonetheless a constitutive feature of the case that the agent is intentionally directed and has some understanding of what she does; and this can be expressed.

reflecting on or understanding *how* she performed her action.<sup>321</sup> The agent has no concept of herself as a highly skilled Frisbee catcher, even though she is one. Finally, unlike Case 2, the Frisbee catch in Case 3 was not an action that anyone might be capable of performing. Rather, it was an action that only a highly skilled Frisbee player could perform.

In this sense, Case 3 is meant to be a paradigmatic example of “mindless” skillful coping. That is, this clearly fictional example is meant to mimic and exaggerate the relevant features of the examples of complex skill that Dreyfus uses (i.e., a highly skilled, normatively meaningful response, but one that does not have even the possibility of reflective guidance or access). If our skillful but unreflective coping truly were “mindless” in an absolute sense, I suppose they would be something like Case 3. In order to see that nevertheless even this is still a case of conceptual activity we should take note of two critical points. First, despite the amnesia, becoming a highly skilled Frisbee player was itself a conceptual undertaking. Dreyfus’s scaffolding analogy is surely right—once we have reached a certain stage of skillful development, the rules and reflective practices that served as scaffolding can be taken down. We no longer require rules or reflections, our perceptual capacities having been refined to the point that we are able to “see” the possibilities for appropriate action and respond accordingly without reflective mediation. As we saw in Chapters Four and Five, however, this does not mean that the activities cease to be conceptual any more than multiplying 7 by 5 ceases to be conceptual once we unreflectively “perceive” that the correct answer is 35 (i.e., without calculating). At the

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<sup>321</sup> I am assuming in each of these cases that, as McDowell’s original example stipulates, the actions are undertaken spontaneously as opposed to being performed on the basis of a reason. One might imagine our Ms. Bourne giving an identical answer to the question of “Why?” though perhaps with a savvy Dreyfusian addendum that she felt drawn to act as she did in response to a perceived field of forces.

highest levels of skillful Frisbee playing, we remain subject to normative criticism and continue to possess an understanding of what we are about. As mature humans this is true even if we can't explain or articulate what we understand and even if we learn the activity without learning explicit rules. Such is still true in Case 3 (e.g., we might imagine a professional Frisbee coach nearby who happens to notice Ms. Bourne's great catch, but who offers some friendly advice on how to improve—"Here, try it again *this way...*"). We've seen from our work in previous chapters that at the height of Ms. Bourne's pre-amnesia Frisbee playing, her skillful catches would have been conceptual. This fact is not going to change simply because she can no longer remember the training or the fact of her abilities.

Second, note that reflective access to her pre-amnesia training is unnecessary in order for her actions to play an epistemic role. This is part of what makes the actual Bourne novels exciting—the actions of the amnesiac serve as *epistemic* evidence. One can imagine a similar mystery scenario surrounding our Frisbee player. In that case her abilities might serve as evidence for who she used to be. The point is that lacking any sort of understanding of how she was able to perform such a catch, the nature of her agential experience—as it is experienced—is nonetheless such as to have epistemic import. It is still an action taken by a human whose intelligible grasp of the world (including her own experience) is in part constituted by its ability to be taken up in language and embedded in the greater context of what the agent knows. Case 3 is thus an example of conceptual activity.

Finally, we can consider Case 2. Unlike Case 4, our agent in Case 2 responds to a phenomenal disturbance rather than to an incoming Frisbee and has poor retroactive access to the action. While the marginal nature of Case 2 makes it easy to misread the

action as mere reflex, this case is meant to stipulate the action as (in a minimal sense) agential. It is perhaps analogous to putting one's hands out to catch oneself when falling. Here it is helpful to recall our discussion above concerning the normatively mediated nature of even this marginal perception and action. Again, we might imagine a superstitious culture that believes that catching projectiles is bad luck.<sup>322</sup> The fact that the agent's unreflective bodily instinct was to grasp the Frisbee is not merely an effect of biological evolution, but is likewise situated within a given background understanding. The bland and insignificant nature of the action from our own perspective masks this fact. Imagining a context with some moral significance to the action (e.g., where catching another's thrown Frisbee is considered inexcusably rude) makes it easier to see how such an action remains normatively significant and relevantly subject to criticism. If there were a Park Patrol whose job included ticketing all those who caught Frisbees, the fact that the woman in Case 2 has a very poor retroactive grasp of her actions is no more a legitimate excuse than is a driver who claims that she was only vaguely aware that she was speeding. Looked at it in this light, we can recognize the action as satisfying the conceptual criteria outlined above.

Cases 2-5, as well as Case 1b, are examples of agential experience—examples of the way in which our conceptuality pervades perception and action, even when reflection does not. Rather than merely contradicting Dreyfus's phenomenological claims, I believe that this analysis is true to the insights he reveals while adding considerably to our understanding of unreflective coping activity. Conceptuality, rather than being a matter of

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<sup>322</sup> That is, imagine the superstitious correlate to the game of soccer where one does not use one's hands, even to protect oneself from a hard kicked ball. Sticking with the analogy of catching oneself while falling, we can imagine a parkour instructor training one to unreflectively role rather than putting out one's hands to break the fall.

reflection or explicit rule-following concerns the *kind* of perception and experience we have; and it is this kind of perception that makes us the sort of agents that we are, making experience intelligible to us in a particular way. Thus, rather than the enemy of skillful coping, conceptuality is central to the nature of what coping is for humans. While I believe this picture of things largely accords with McDowell's conceptuality, it extends his notions to account more fully for the sorts of phenomena with which Dreyfus makes his challenge.

## **II. Objections**

There are a number of plausible objections that can be made against my picture of a phenomenologically unified, conceptually integrated domain of experiential intelligibility. I will respond to those objections that I find most pressing before turning to my conclusions.

### *Difference in access*

I began in Chapter One by describing what I believe is an implausible dualism in Dreyfus's account—one that he acknowledges without being able to satisfactorily account for. Rather than simply criticizing him on this basis, my own account tries to maintain his core claims without having to posit his dualism. In order to do so, I have argued against Dreyfus's notion of a ground-floor coping vs. top-floor linguistic and conceptual activity, or even a background-foreground distinction that imparts a sort of second-class, parasitic relationship between perception and language. Instead, I have argued for an ontologically and phenomenologically unified, if asymmetrically constituted, domain of intelligibility, one

wherein our linguistic capacities are just as fundamental as our perceptual modalities.<sup>323</sup>

That is, I claim that the two are irrevocably integrated in such a way as to present an intelligibly unified phenomenal field in experience. In Dreyfus's terminology, for mature human beings language is as fundamental an aspect of world-disclosure as is perception.

There is an implicit objection to this position in much of contemporary philosophy of perception. In the same way that Dreyfus criticizes McDowell's conceptualism as arriving on the scene too late, one can notice a basic asymmetry in the form of a dependence relation between our perceptual and linguistic access to the world. Initially, it's plausible to say that our linguistic or conceptual *access* to the world is different than the access of our perceptual modalities. For example, I can see with *just* my eyes; vision does not depend on a separate modality. Rather, the biology of my visual system puts me in direct contact with what I experience. On the other hand my capacity for language, inasmuch as it is involved in accessing or understanding the world around me, must work parasitically on what my modalities initially present. Taken as a biological fact of the matter, such a view denies my claims by reinserting a two-tiered process and dependence relation between what we perceive and what we understand.

This objection mirrors prominent objections to McDowell's claim that perception is conceptual, positing "raw perceptions" which we then conceptualize by adding something onto or performing a function with what is given in perception. This is a complex subject

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<sup>323</sup> While I am convinced of the multi-modal nature of perception, I do not claim that all modalities symmetrically constitute our phenomenal field. For example, there seems ample evidence that vision dominates our perceptual experiences—if not to the degree that we commonly assume. Vision is both more common and compelling to our understanding than, say, smell. Similarly, I have argued, language is an asymmetrically primary contributor to human intelligibility.

with an extensive literature that cannot be adequately addressed here.<sup>324</sup> On its own, however, it is not a well-reasoned objection but an (often assumed) alternative account of what perception amounts to—one that I think misunderstands not just what we experience but the very nature of how humans perceive.

Unique to my own response is the use of phenomenology in support of my conceptualist claims. As discussed in Chapters Two, Four and Five, Dreyfus's model of the intentional arc in skillful-perceptual discrimination not only accords with, but his phenomenology strongly supports the claim that perception is itself normative—as opposed to the weaker claim that perception is merely normatively constrained.<sup>325</sup> As we've seen, the idea that past experience and skillful development informs perception—that perception itself is attuned by and discloses an environment on the basis of that experience—is already to deny a theory of perception that strongly compartmentalizes the content of perception from those faculties or dispositions that operate upon that content. In other words, just as we saw with language, phenomenological consistency impels us to grant that the nature of perception and not just what we do with perception changes on the basis of our other human faculties.

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<sup>324</sup> In addition to the literature on perception, this issue plays large in theories of rationality from Kant onward. See Heck (2000) for a criticism of McDowell's arguments and Matthew Boyle (2012) for a helpful discussion and criticism of what he calls "additive theories of rationality" in general. Boyle's focus equally concerns the nature of rationality and perception. Both authors explicitly address the debate over nonconceptual content.

<sup>325</sup> The notion that perception is normatively laden is common among existential phenomenologists, stemming from the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. "The life of consciousness—cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life—is subtended by an 'intentional arc' which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects. It is this intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility" (Merleau-Ponty, 1958: 157). See Kelly (2010) for a recent example in the philosophy of perception.

One of the motivations for the view in the philosophy of perception that holds separate what we perceive from what we cognitively do with perception (a motivation that manifests in the debate between Dreyfus and McDowell) stems from our knowledge of biological evolution and human continuity with other animals. It is assumed that the late chronological development of higher-order cognitive functions implies a strong separation. In contrast, I've argued that chronological development does not dictate the nature of one's developed capacities. In Chapter Four I made use of an analogy that concerned the integrated nature of our perceptual modalities, one that applies equally well to the objection in question. Positing that on the timeline of human evolution our tactile senses were developed prior to vision or proprioception does not entail that the nature of tactile perception remains unchanged in the wake these, nor does it lend credence to the claims that after first receiving tactile data we then make judgments about the appearance, distance, or location of the object we touch. Likewise, the later development of cognitive capacities—even within a single human life—does not entail or lend credence to perceptual theories that keep the two separate.

Chronological development is simply not an argument against the notion of qualitative change on the basis of what comes later. Hence while it is true that, for example, language “makes use of” what is “first” accessed through our perceptual modalities, this is not to say that language does not also fundamentally alter the nature of perception. Moreover, as we've seen, careful phenomenology suggests the opposite. In this sense, our perceptual modalities' access to the world is mutually dependent on the intelligible access bequeathed by language.

*Partial does not imply total content conceptualism*

Critics might acknowledge the validity of my examples and even the reality of our conceptual capacities to shape the nature of perception in a significant range of human activities, without acknowledging that this implies total content conceptualism.

Nonconceptualists might argue against my position, noting with Dreyfus that from the fact that perception *can* be conceptual in nature, “it isn’t obvious that there is only *one* way experience takes hold of the world so that *all* forms of human experience must be [conceptual].”<sup>326</sup> In other words, one might claim that my arguments serve only to prove partial and not total content conceptualism, that the genuine conceptuality of the coping practices discussed by Dreyfus does not entail a holistic change in the nature of all perception. Such a claim would amount to a heterogeneous theory of perception—perception is neither simply continuous with animal perception, nor fundamentally altered by our conceptuality, but is integrated with conceptuality in a piecemeal way, as dictated by the nature of the activity in which one engages.

The reality is that I do not have a knock-down argument for why there could not be some kind of marginal human experience or perception that remains nonconceptual (according to my sense of conceptual). A heterogeneous theory of perception along these lines strikes me as ad hoc and inelegant, but that on its own is not enough to conclusively dismiss such a theory. I do believe, however, that my arguments make this possibility implausible. In order to highlight this implausibility, consider the nature of Dreyfus’s critical strategy within the debate. In response to McDowell’s claim of total content conceptualism Dreyfus attempts to display various forms of absorbed coping as concrete

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<sup>326</sup> 2013: §1.

counterexamples. The practices he discusses not only resist but are in some cases incompatible with reflection. A particularly impressive feature of Dreyfus's critique is his ability to marshal numerous examples from both the center and margins of human experience that are not only neglected in the literature on nonconceptual content, but which serve as a challenge to the assumptions of both sides of the debate. If I am right, however, then not only do these practices fail as counterexamples, but the pervasive phenomenon of embodied coping actually strengthens conceptualism (properly understood). Not only do we have compelling epistemological reasons but equally strong phenomenological reasons to take conceptualism seriously. While I wouldn't presume to deny philosophers' creative ingenuity to think up more possible contenders for agential nonconceptualism, I find it difficult to imagine what a normative, agential experience that remained nonconceptual in my sense could look like.

Even so, my goal is not ideological in nature. What I have set out to do is not to prove total content conceptualism, but instead to move forward the debate, arguing for a resolution that allows us to more clearly understand conceptualism without eliding the compelling case of our embodied nature. My main goal has been to show that a unified approach drawing on the merits of both camps is more plausible than either position in isolation.

### *Two-streams theory of perception*

One might press this point concerning perception as a rich phenomenon capable of supporting more than one form of content. Rather than positing an ontological division in the nature of perception as Dreyfus does, one might nonetheless maintain a dualism in the

functional nature of perception along the lines of Goodale and Milner's neurological two-streams hypothesis where perceptual information travels in two different streams (ventral and dorsal) to two different centers in the brain in order to facilitate different functions (often denoted as 'perception' and 'action' or 'what' and 'where' functions).<sup>327</sup> In this way perceptual information is experienced differently as a result of the functional role it plays, whether to reflect on or bodily cope with our perceptions.

Before responding, we need to be clear on what exactly this possibility claims. One way to read the two-streams hypothesis in this scenario is merely to note that visual information can be used in a given way or by a given capacity without that information being used concurrently in different ways or by separate capacities. Here visual information can inform and motivate motor-intentional coping activities without informing or motivating reflective activities (and vice versa). The foregoing should already suffice to show that this weaker reading is perfectly compatible with my account, which only argues for the conceptual nature of perception and that an inability to reflect on experience in the midst of absorbed coping is not evidence one way or the other concerning perception's constitutional makeup. I have throughout endorsed Dreyfus's phenomenology concerning the reality of skillful degradation in the wake of reflection for certain activities and discussed its compatibility with my claim that such experiences remain conceptual.

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<sup>327</sup> See (1995). In the wake of Goodale and Milner the two-streams hypothesis has been both problematized and refined, but underlying much of the literature there continues to be a basic ventral-dorsal split between perceptually encoded information that underlies our ability to describe a perceptual scene versus our ability to be guided in action. See Clark (2009) for an overview of contemporary research and a positive philosophical evaluation of the continued relevance of the two-streams hypothesis. See Noë (2010) for a more critical philosophical evaluation.

One might, however, press for a stronger reading of the two-streams hypothesis as a means of positing two types of experiential content and as suggestive of an explanation for why, as Dreyfus has put it, “mindedness is the enemy of embodied coping.”<sup>328</sup> (I take it that the most plausible attempt at such a two-streams-style defense of Dreyfus’s dualism would be metaphorical or at most appeal to the hypothesis as making plausible a similar neurological undergirding. Thus, the recent decline of the Goodale-Milner theory as supporting a strict bifurcation of visual data would be less relevant.<sup>329</sup>)

The difficulty with this stronger reading lies in its dependence on the discrete nature of the information carried in the two streams. Just as there is strong evidence to deny a strict neurological bifurcation,<sup>330</sup> there is also strong evidence (as we’ve seen) to deny that absorbed coping experience remains necessarily discrete from the meanings instantiated in our semantic practices. To recognize that we sometimes unreflectively cope with perception and at other times reflect on those perceptions does not commit one to or make more plausible the claim that these two activities in fact make use of differing kinds of perceptual information. Nor does it imply that to take up experience in reflection or language is to necessarily transform the nature of the perceptual content. As I argued in Chapters Four and Five, our ability to semantically reinforce coping makes the possibility of functionally differentiated contents *à la* the stronger reading implausible.

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<sup>328</sup> 2007a: 353. See Hudin (2006) for an attempt to evaluate the use of the Goodale-Milner hypothesis as neurological support for Dreyfus’s dualistic understanding of intentionality.

<sup>329</sup> A word of caution is in order. At this point our understanding of the neurological basis for consciousness is so inchoate that importing arguments based on neurology is necessarily a painstaking and ultimately inconclusive affair. Nevertheless, while we cannot be cavalier, information garnered across cognitive science disciplines can obviously be suggestive and (as is empirically obvious) there is a great deal of room for creative and responsible dialogue.

<sup>330</sup> For a representative sampling of recent criticism, see Deubel, Schneider and Paprotta (1998); Adamo and Ferber (2009); and Kitadono and Humphreys (2009).

One might take a different tack here: recent neuroscience makes implausible the very notion of a unified content, of a kind of representation that is shared across different capacities and experiences. Rather one might posit either a proliferation of contents<sup>331</sup> or else claim the nature of perception and information as radically indexed to the particular perceptual event in question.

Vis-à-vis our present discussion, the mass of research inspired by the two-streams hypothesis isn't very helpful in large part because it doesn't overcome the consciousness gap. One need not minimize the significance of the basic outlines of the two-streams and other neurological hypotheses in order to note that their implications for the content of agential experience are far from clear. Thus, for example, an inability to locate a specific neurological counterpart to the various capacities we've discussed that contributes to the encoding of all other information had by other capacities is not an argument against the claim that our experience is intelligible on the basis of what we're able to do—that is, in terms of our ability to perceive, skillfully act upon, and express that experience. Nor is it an argument that when we merely perceive, act upon, or express experience that something important is shared across these different activities, as I've argued here. If I'm right that the nature of the intelligibility of human experience is mutually constituted by our perceptual modalities, skillful dispositions, and linguistic capacities, then reference to the underlying neurological picture will not, without a great deal of argument, be anything other than orthogonal to the question of whether experience is conceptual.

With regard to a multiple or no content objection, nothing in what I've said here denies that there are multiple, important and philosophically valuable distinctions to make

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<sup>331</sup> Adrian Cussins' theory of content (see 2003) does this, though without recourse to neuroscience.

between experiences. Indeed, I've explicitly supported Dreyfus's claim that there is something importantly different between an unreflective, skillful coping activity and reflecting on that activity. Instead my argument has been that there is something importantly similar that also unites them—namely, the conceptual nature of their overall intelligibility. I would argue that the same can be said in response to those positing multiple or no-content theories.

### *Worries about non-propositionalism*

According to my account there are both linguistic expressions and (intentional) experiences that are irreducibly non-propositional. This fact is bound to raise several different worries among philosophers on either side of the Dreyfus-McDowell divide. Once again, the propositionality of language and intentional experience are contentious issues with a large literature, and I cannot hope to do justice to or fully satisfy those worries here. Instead, I will respond to three important considerations in an attempt to clarify and show that there is nothing particularly implausible with regard to my non-propositionalism.

First, we ought to note that there is growing support for what Nuel Belnap called the 'Declarative Fallacy,' the fallacy of maintaining that everything important in language can be derived from or accounted for in declarative, propositional sentences.<sup>332</sup> Something like this propositionalist fallacy is advocated not only in the philosophy of language, but in philosophy of emotions, attitudes, and epistemology. The current trajectory, however, appears to be expansionist rather than reductionist with regard to intentionality,

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<sup>332</sup> See Belnap (1990).

recognizing non-propositional experiences of all kinds.<sup>333</sup> Consequently, there is no prima facie worry in positing irreducibly non-propositional forms of expression or experience.<sup>334</sup>

Of particular relevance to the debate over nonconceptual content generally and at the margins of the Dreyfus-McDowell debate itself, is the question of whether the use of demonstrative concepts or otherwise propositionally indicating aspects of experience allows us to adequately express that for which we lack concepts.<sup>335</sup> As we saw in Chapter Three McDowell denies the propositionalism of experience, but nevertheless remains something of an “all but” propositionalist. A great deal of experience seems unproblematically amenable to propositional articulation, and even those experiences for which propositional expressions fail (e.g., because we lack the needed concepts) we can demonstratively indicate or propositionally embed. McDowell sometimes relies on this fact to support his Pervasiveness Thesis.<sup>336</sup> On the other hand, Dreyfus has given us plausible evidence that many of our experiences and specifically embodied coping operate non-propositionally. As we saw in Chapters Two and Four he highlights structural elements of coping—such as conditions of improvement—that are neither truth-valuable nor binary.

In this dissertation I have argued for three points on this issue, endorsing and denying aspects of both Dreyfus’s and McDowell’s positions. First, I have argued that Dreyfus’s phenomenology is correct to posit non-propositional aspects of experience. Bodily solicitations to action in skillful coping are motor-intentional and exhibit conditions

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<sup>333</sup> For recent representative examples see Montague (2007), Merricks (2009), Bengson and Moffett (2011), and Mastop (2011).

<sup>334</sup> The contentious nature of the debate over nonconceptual content surveyed in Chapter Two is certainly a testament to the latter.

<sup>335</sup> The debate concerning the role of demonstratives in supporting conceptualism is ongoing and animate. Recent salvos include Roskies (2010) and Shieber (2010).

<sup>336</sup> See (1994a), especially Afterward, Part II.

of improvement, often with a multi-dimensional structure and whose fulfillment is usually a matter of degree. This structure might lack determinate or specifiable goals, as we saw with one's for-the-sake-of-which (e.g., it might genuinely be an open question in some situation how one can best pursue being a father). Being solicited and skillfully engaging with solicitations in order to optimize our situation is a matter of holistically sensing and bodily responding to situational tensions as opposed to discrete, propositionally articulable facts. Also, as noted in Chapter Four, the experience of being bodily solicited and the pragmatic force of expressions that work in tandem with these solicitations exhibit something like an imperatival structure (which is true even when the sentences uttered are grammatically declarative). Consequently, if we try to force skillful coping into propositional models of discourse we inevitably level constitutive features of our experience—we get the phenomena wrong.

This fact, however, does not bar one from expressing one's experience in such a way (and this is the critical point) as to allow that experience to play an epistemically embedded role. This is the second point for which I have argued, that we ought to recognize an important and often overlooked distinction between indicating and expressing an experience. On the one hand, we can linguistically indicate an experience such that the content or meaning or normativity of that experience is capable of playing an epistemic role, or such that the agential aspects of an experience are subject to rational criticism. Doing so, however, is different than firing off a speech act that adequately captures *and* expresses all agential aspects of that same experience. We can acknowledge our pervasive ability to do the former without presuming to always do the latter. For example, one can imagine a preposterously pedantic soccer player reporting to a journalist that "Reacting

appropriately to the opposing team's defensive set-up was a matter of being solicited by a continuously updated, multi-dimensional spectrum of possibility, the optimization of which was always a matter of degree." As a proposition, the content of this sentence expresses something that either is or is not the case, something that either does or does not accurately describe a player's experience of the game. Pragmatically, while it indicates the situation, it does not in fact express the experience. It is not like stating, "I see a blue cup on the table" in response to the question, "What do you see?"

This point seems uncontroversial. If we could not at least linguistically indicate even our absorbed coping experiences, then it is difficult to see in what sense those experiences could be agential or even how philosophers like Dreyfus and McDowell could argue about their nature. What is controversial is that such expressions are in fact apt to the experience along the same spectrum of specificity and adequacy that characterizes all speech acts purporting to convey an experience. Someone like Dreyfus might deny this fact, claiming that such expressions, no matter how pedantic or sophisticated, are in fact nothing more than a sort of empty, formal indication. Thus for example, coaches say all kinds of things in order to help orient and train their athletes to perform in incredibly difficult circumstances. As noted in Chapter Five, a Dreyfusian critic might claim that much of this is mere rhetoric, a pragmatic form of encouragement. One might claim that in training a baseball player to hit a curveball—a reportedly difficult feat that resists programmatic instruction—a coach's instructions amount to nothing more than a means to boost morale and keep the player engaged in the activity long enough for the player's body to begin to sense and respond to features of the situation that resist linguistic articulation. In other words, one might

develop a theory of the coach's instructions that is the athletic equivalent to moral expressivism.

There are a number of things to note in response to such an objection. To begin, as stated above, all expressions of experience are on a spectrum of specificity and are likewise always a matter of degree. Perhaps there are indeed certain situations or expressions (e.g., mere ostension) that function as a sort of limit case, a mere formal indication. Precisely as a limit case, however, such expressions are still on the spectrum. Evidence of this fact is our ability to improve our articulations, to get better at expressing difficult or unfamiliar situations. Hence we go from an initial "Ah! It's almost like a pain somewhere in my leg" to "It's a dull, throbbing discomfort without a specific epicenter, but that moves up and down my leg in such an insistent manner that I cannot ignore it even if it doesn't render me disabled." Dreyfus's careful phenomenology is a potent example of this just this—getting clearer about and more skillfully articulating what is primarily experienced in transparent, unreflective ways.

As another example, we can see that some teachers (and certain phrases) are more (linguistically and empirically) successful than others at training musicians to understand and play music.<sup>337</sup> They do more than stand in as cheerleaders. In this sense, there is an analogy (and sometimes more than an analogy) between linguistic instruction and metaphor. Without attempting to analyze or take a stand on the complicated subject of how metaphor functions, we can note that while metaphor does not describe in a straightforward way, one cannot make merely arbitrary comparisons and consider them

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<sup>337</sup> There is a large literature discussing the nature and use of metaphor in music. For a comprehensive discussion see Spitzer (2003). For specific discussions on the use and efficacy of metaphor in musical training see Schippers (2006), Woody (2002), and Barten (1998).

successful metaphors. Good metaphors are literally instructive; they capture and convey important features of a thing without directly describing. Articulating one's coping experiences (or linguistically coaching others in complicated embodied practices) is likewise literally instructive.

Perhaps the most telling response, however, is the phenomenological argument given in Chapter Four, where we saw that nothing in principle keeps speech acts from pragmatically integrating within a situation in such a way as to convey exactly those holistic elements to which we bodily respond. This is the third and final point for which I have tried to argue with regard to the relationship between propositions and coping. In context (as we saw in Chapter Four), the meaning of a warning issued from a caller to a racecar driver is to both indicate an entire situation and to bodily prime or motivate the driver's body to respond accordingly. As we've seen, the ability of language to function in this way is not necessarily a matter of words being appropriated in a purely pragmatic sense—that is, calls in racing and other relevantly similar speech acts are not *mere* indication. Rather, we have seen examples wherein the ability of a speech act to play its role in reinforcing absorbed coping is dependent on the semantic content of the utterance used.<sup>338</sup>

To summarize my position on this matter, I agree with Dreyfus concerning the irreducibly non-propositional nature of embodied coping. This fact, however, does not imply that such experiences are epistemically inert or that we cannot grapple with them in language. Not only can we at a minimum linguistically ostend or propositionally embed

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<sup>338</sup> This was not to say that all practical uses of speech are in this sense semantically constituted; rather, the force of this argument was to undermine Dreyfus's claims that coping is in-principle un-amenable to discursive articulation or that language could not function semantically within our absorbed coping practices.

such experiences, but such expressions are likewise susceptible to linguistic development. That is, given the spectrum from indication to finely-detailed description on which expressions of experience lie, one's articulations are always potentially susceptible to movement along that spectrum. Finally, there is movement in the other direction as well, with language motor-intentionally integrating in our absorbed coping practices. Hence language—including at times propositional language—is apt to indicate and accurately convey information about our experiences of skillful coping, even when the relevant experience *as it experienced* is irreducibly non-propositional.

So far I have primarily discussed propositional worries from the perspective of non-propositionalists like Dreyfus. That is, I have defended my claims concerning the articulability of and our ability to linguistically engage with non-propositional experiences. On the other side of the aisle is a companion worry: I claim that our irreducibly non-propositional, bodily coping experiences are normative and play (or can play) epistemic roles, and this claim is key to my conclusion that these experiences are conceptual. One might object that, on the one hand, normativity is commonly understood as rule-governed (i.e., propositional) and propositions are generally taken as that which stands in the “is a reason for” relationship (i.e., the structures capable of instantiating an epistemic role). How then can I claim that these irreducibly non-propositional coping experiences are nevertheless (potential) players in the space of reason?<sup>339</sup>

In short, my claims rest on the tradition taken up by McDowell that our having conceptual capacities effects a holistic change in the sort of creatures we are. Specifically, I

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<sup>339</sup> Note that while I place this objection in the mouth of propositionalists, Dreyfus himself sometimes shares the underlying assumption that if non-propositional, then coping experiences cannot play a role in the space of reasons. See Chapter Two.

have argued that the nature of our perceptual capacities and bodily skills are in fact other than they would be without those linguistic capacities, that we cannot account for either perception or skillful activity in humans without referring to our conceptuality. This is because conceptual capacities are constitutively integrated with our perceptual modalities and skillful dispositions in the constitution of intelligible experience. This means that even when we lack the ability to articulate certain experiences, they are nevertheless in a form that is in-principle capable of linguistic articulation (however poorly). As already noted, we can at the least indicate or embed such experiences inside of propositions, allowing them to play traditionally inferential roles.

Hence there is no theoretical barrier to their playing an epistemic role, even if one maintains that propositional structures are necessary for inference. I would note, however, that requiring propositional structure in order to effect inference is controversial—in that one needs to at least tell a further story beyond claiming that all inference functions as a means of preserving propositional truth. To see this, note that we can and often do make inferences from non-propositions. For example, I infer from my wife's question of whether I am cold *that* I ought to turn down the air conditioning. One might respond, as above, that I do so by translating or embedding the question into propositional structures. In many cases, however, this is phenomenologically implausible. I make the move seamlessly from question to propositional conclusion, unreflectively, without embedding the question in propositional intermediaries and without logical deduction.

Obviously one can maintain that such abilities are nevertheless dependent on implicitly propositional practices. While I am skeptical about such claims, I do not believe that anything hangs on this point. What matters is that any theory of inference must

somehow account for this everyday occurrence of going inferentially (or at least in an inference-like manner) from a non-proposition to a proposition. Starting with non-propositional coping experiences need not be any more controversial or mysterious than starting from imperatives and interrogatives. My point is simply that as a product (in part) of our conceptual capacities, agential experience is in-principle available to those conceptual operations that allow us to make these sorts of epistemic moves.<sup>340</sup>

Moreover, as we've seen, the epistemic influence flows both ways, and our embodied coping practices—including things like transparent social practices—are (in-principle) vulnerable to rational criticism or rule-governed understandings. Chauvinistic behavior is both a legitimate target of and (thankfully) potentially vulnerable to rational criticism whether one has been unreflectively socialized into or reflectively adopted and internalized a chauvinistic understanding. Likewise, as just noted, language is not only efficacious as a means of reasoning or making experience available to reason. Language (including constitutively semantic speech acts) is also efficacious in terms of its direct bodily impact on emotion, readiness, action, perception of affordances, etc. We hear and bodily respond to meanings in normatively (in-) appropriate ways.

All of this does not completely answer the question of exactly how propositional reasons interact with non-propositional bodily dispositions. Rather, it makes clearer our understanding of the phenomena—of the integrated nature of our conceptual, perceptual, and skillful capacities—and deflates the implausibility of that interaction. Given the conceptual nature of both our coping and reasoning practices, rational moves between one

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<sup>340</sup> Relevant to this discussion, Kukla and Lance together with Greg Restall develop a revisionary understanding of inference that seeks to cover all epistemically licensed moves, including those with non-propositional starting points and those resulting in action. See 2009: Appendix.

and the other are no more mysterious than rational moves between categorically different speech acts.

### **III. Final thoughts**

The Dreyfus-McDowell debate is not only significant in terms of marking a historic and compelling bridge between Continental and Analytic traditions by two important and influential philosophers who are themselves rooted in these respective traditions. It is also significant in terms of its breadth and the rigor with which it fruitfully explores animating issues within contemporary philosophy. The scope of the debate's content is historical as well as systematic, drawing on both philosophers' years of exegetical work and engagement with Aristotle, Kant, Heidegger, Gadamer, Wittgenstein, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. The historical allusions and analyses in the debate, however, are in the service of understanding and exorcising tensions in contemporary philosophy, much as it is in their respective works outside of the debate.

Consequently, the debate is a rich undertaking relevant to numerous conversations in philosophy today. In this dissertation I have sought to address questions that spring up at the intersection of philosophy of perception, epistemology, and philosophy of language. In each case these questions have also been a means of addressing the relevance of phenomenology to contemporary philosophy as both a tradition and a philosophical methodology. To conclude I want to review the implications of this dissertation for each of these areas and briefly note the future research towards which it points.

Phenomenology is often used today as a negative measure of adequacy. It functions as a constraint on contemporary philosophical theories, demanding a rigorous connection between theory and experience as it is lived. In order to function in this negative role, however, phenomenology must likewise play an important positive role. As Dreyfus notes, “the job of phenomenologists is to get clear concerning the phenomena that need to be explained.”<sup>341</sup> Its success in this area has stemmed in part from its ability first to analytically criticize the inadequacy of exclusively third-personal perspectives in accounting for the richness of human experience. Second, phenomenology seeks to “get clear” on the first-personal perspective in such a way as to make it available to traditional philosophical and scientific analysis.

Crucially, in order to accomplish this goal, existential phenomenology and phenomenological description of the sort that Dreyfus engages in attempts to bring to light experiential phenomena that show themselves only in certain circumstances—namely, unreflective, skillful coping. As we have seen, Dreyfus’s insistence on the nonconceptual nature of absorbed coping experience is related to the fact that this experience, as it is experienced, is only available *while fully engaged*. Phenomenological description, then, is not merely a kind of *careful* or *precise* or even perspectival description. Rather, it is description of the sort discussed in Chapter Two that *displays* the phenomena in question by helping to practically orient its audience in such a way that the phenomena in question can in fact show up in experience.<sup>342</sup> In the context of his debate with McDowell, affordances are perhaps the paradigmatic example.

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<sup>341</sup> 2005: §2.

<sup>342</sup> See Wrathall (2006) for discussion of this aspect of phenomenological description.

In this dissertation phenomenology has played each of these roles. I have used it to criticize Dreyfus's position on the propositionality of language, its function in world-disclosure, and the unified (as opposed to dualistic) nature of perceptual experience. Phenomenology has also been key to my criticism of McDowell's tendency to emphasize the propositionality (or propositional availability) of perception and his dismissive attitude toward the relevance of embodied normativity, such as that instantiated in transparent social practices. In each of these cases phenomenology has served as a constant challenge to our tendency to slip into theoretically biased characterizations. Most importantly, I have attempted to use phenomenological description in order to display the phenomenon of semantically dependent language in absorbed coping experiences. Doing so has been key to my attempt to persuade readers concerning the unified nature of human intelligibility by attuning them to familiar, first-personal phenomena that exemplify the integration of language, skillful coping, and perception. These attempts, however, have been necessarily brief. There is still a great deal to "get clear" about in this area.

On its own, however, we've seen that phenomenology is inadequate to fully address the questions that animate the debate. Having brought to light the reality and agential nature of, for example, transparent social practices, phenomenology cannot then decide the question of whether these practices are conceptual. Recognizing the conditions that prevail or the structural features wherein certain phenomena are experienced, it is then a further question as to whether that experience is accurately labeled conceptual. Indirectly then, this dissertation has argued that phenomenology is most effective not as a tool to be used in isolation but in tandem with more traditional philosophical methodologies.

As discussed above, my claims concerning the nature of perception are holistic. While affirming our biological and evolutionary continuity with animals, and hence acknowledging the later chronological development of our conceptual faculties, I have denied the popularly affirmed implication that human and animal perception are consequently identical. Rather, I have argued that perceptual content—including the motor-intentional content appropriately championed by existential phenomenologists—is qualitatively distinct. Just as the kind of perceptual content available cannot be adequately specified independently of one's perceptual modalities, so too it cannot be adequately specified independently of our skillful dispositions and conceptual capacities. Human perception is irreducibly normative in a manner constituted by our practical and rational understanding. Having worked out these positive claims, however, I have done very little to situate them in the greater philosophical dialogue concerning perception. Specifically, I have not attempted to state the relevance of these claims with regard to either intentional or disjunctive theories of perception and the host of philosophical problems with which these theories grapple.

Another aspect of my holistic account of perceptual experience builds off of Merleau-Ponty in asserting the synesthetic or multi-modal nature of perception. Not only is it difficult to individuate our sense modalities, I also claim that what is in fact experienced by a given modality depends on the contributions of our other modalities with regard to the overall meaningfulness of the perception. Physiological relations between our sense of taste and smell have long been recognized, leading many to superficially note the interrelated nature of the perceptual content that these modalities impart. It is perhaps surprising, then, that the consensus opinion in philosophy of perception continues to

maintain the strict metaphysical and epistemological distinctness of our senses. While my arguments here have indirectly called this consensus into question—noting as it does that the analytic distinctions we can make regarding different modalities do not imply anything like the strong independence that is generally assumed—this has not been a sustained focus of the dissertation. Consequently, there is a great deal more to say about the multi-modal nature of perception. Additionally, while Merleau-Ponty is increasingly taken seriously in contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science, almost nothing of his synesthetic claims concerning perceptual experience have made their way into mainstream discussions. Both of these remain areas for future research.

Finally with regard to perception, my account sets up an important criticism of both conceptualist and nonconceptualist overemphasis on mental intentionality, to the exclusion of motor-intentionality. Failing to recognize the unavoidably embodied nature of perceptual content is an oversight that prevents both conceptualists and nonconceptualists from adequately discussing and accounting for the nature of perception and the kind of intentionality it exhibits. Those who do take situated embodiment as a critical element of perception are too quick to assimilate these insights in support of their nonconceptualist positions. What is needed is not only a more comprehensive understanding of the embodied nature of perception, but likewise the embodied nature of cognition itself. Motor-intentional experience is not only of benefit to McDowellian conceptualism as argued in this dissertation, but is also a potential corrective to the greater debate over nonconceptual content, including the positions held by many nonconceptualists.

Epistemologically, my arguments have been conceptualist in a McDowellian vein. I have endorsed his Pervasiveness Thesis as an implication of the qualitative change our

conceptual capacities make to our perceptual and motor-intentional content. I have also argued, however, that along with imparting non-inferential beliefs to our understanding, perception normatively informs our engaged body. Perception affords both normative and rational action, not by making available a separate form of content but on account of the integrated intelligibility of the content. Perception is informed by the intentional arc of past experience—reflective and skillful. Once again, my comments here have been brief. As noted above, much remains to be said concerning what exactly this sort of embodied epistemology means and how it operates. The account given here of a unified perceptual and experiential content spares us the task of bridging an ontological gap or accounting for a transformation between the world as it is had in our embodied engagements and how it is had in reflection. Likewise, we can make sense of how the one informs the other. This does not, however, fully clarify or account for what does change when we go from practical immersion to reflective engagement.

Perhaps most conspicuous vis-à-vis the present epistemological landscape, we can ask how my account bears on the current debate over knowledge-how. On the one hand, I deny the recent claims of those who attempt to reduce practical knowledge-how to a species of propositional knowledge-that. On the other, I deny the claims of certain non-reductionist proponents of knowledge-how who deny the involvement of conceptual capacities or who make conceptual states synonymous with concept-possession or deployment. There is significant work to do in situating my account, which falls outside of the normal parameters of the know-how debate just as it does the debate over nonconceptual content.

Finally, at the center of these discussions has been a focus on language and specifically the relation between expressive utterance and motor-intentional activity. Once again, I have rejected the common dichotomy that separates linguistic practices from motor-intentional coping in favor of an account that recognizes both the use of language in skillful disclosure and likewise the immediate motor-intentional import of language with regard to comportment. The vast literature concerning the pragmatics of language revolves primarily around either the relevance of context in determining what was said or the way in which an utterance performs a given action or communicates beyond the semantic meaning of that utterance. In either case, the information or speech act is often taken as propositionally characterizable. The relation between language and motor-intentional action or orientation on my account, however, is not propositionally characterizable. This raises a host of further questions concerning the relation between linguistic expression and motor-intentional experience, the pragmatic function of language, and linguistic contextualism.

All of this is fruit for further research, and the nature of the phenomena in question are such that research in one of these areas has inevitable implications for research in the others. Ultimately, I believe the debate between Dreyfus and McDowell is a success because of the occasion it gives for a wide ranging exploration of contemporary issues and the fecund opportunity it provides for further philosophical investigation. Additionally, it models the way in which the compartmentalized and largely social division between Analytic and Continental philosophy can be superseded by a joint commitment to philosophical exploration. My hope is that this dissertation follows their lead and is likewise a success in moving the debate forward by concretely answering some of the more

prominent questions presented in Dreyfus's and McDowell's interchange. That is, I hope that the questions investigated here have been replaced by a host of new questions—thus granting us an opportunity to better grasp the phenomenon of human being as we are compelled to further, conceptually embodied investigation.

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