

THE BATTLE OF MYTHS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL TAKE ON THE DREYFUS-MCDOWELL DEBATE

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In this paper I take stock of the Dreyfus-McDowell debate regarding the classical conceptualism-nonconceptualism debate. At stake is the fundamental distinction between pre-theoretical experience and the conceptual rendering of it. Can pure intuitive experience be investigated in its immediacy, or is it always pervaded with conceptual mindedness? Is Kant right that intuitions without concepts are blind? If so, isn't phenomenological philosophy a fatally flawed endeavor? I shall defend the thesis that phenomenology is both feasible and fundamental. However, Dreyfus's idea that pre-theoretical experience is somewhat ineffable and nonrational will be criticized as nonphenomenological in the final analysis.

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The Myth-Debate. It is widely known that Dreyfus has been critical of the idea which bestows preeminence on explicit, objective knowledge over against what he considers to be the more fundamental dimension of practical absorbed coping. To put it bluntly, absorbed coping precedes—and is therefore more originary than—deliberative reasoning. On Dreyfus's terms, no suitable description of the conceptual upper floors of the edifice of human experience can succeed in absence of a fitting understanding of the embodied, absorbed coping going on on the ground floor (2005, 47). The same problem applies, of course, to classical cognitive endeavors with their failed attempts to answer the enigma of human knowledge by tackling the issues as from above, that is, by programming theoretical, explicit knowledge assuming that, by proceeding this way, a thorough understanding of cognition will be gained. The upshot of the cognitivist tradition is then marked by the importance it bestows on conceptual activity, even to the point of conceiving of matters of perception and skillful coping as needing a set of logical conditions of satisfaction: “the logical structure of intentional phenomena” (Searle 2000, 75).

On Dreyfus's view, McDowell is also fond of this primacy of the logical and conceptual floor, even though he conceives of the experiencing and acting subject as “a living thing, with active and passive bodily powers that are generally her own; she is herself embodied, substantially present in the world that she experiences and acts on” (2000, 111). According to McDowell, the view that perceptual experience is somehow nonconceptual must be regarded as an unqualified claim based on the idea that, when referring to experience by means of a judgement, “one moves from nonconceptual knowledge to conceptual content” (2000, 47). This way of conceiving things no doubt reminds one of Kant's old dictum that intuitions without concepts are blind, and this is precisely McDowell's Kantian objection to any account of perception pretending to get rid of conceptual content (2000, 53-54). Moreover, “to say that an experience is not blind is to say that it is intelligible to its subject as purporting to be awareness

of a feature of objective reality: as a seemingly glimpse of the world” (2000, 54). However, this is precisely what Dreyfus calls the “myth of the mental”: the idea that all intelligibility, even perception and skillful coping, must be conceptual, even implicitly (2005, 51). On this regard, Dreyfus brings up the Merleau-Pontyan (2005, 34) objection to intellectualism on McDowell’s all-pervasive conceptual powers: “for the intellectualist, judgement is everywhere pure sensation is not, which is to say everywhere. For McDowell, *mind* is everywhere the pure given is not, that is to say, all the way out” (*idem*). This talk of ‘the given’ refers, of course, to Sellars’s well-known critique of the myth of the given (Sellars 1997), which plays a major role in McDowell’s theoretical framework. Dreyfus pins on McDowell the Sellarsian idea that “perception is conceptual all the way out” (2005, 47) and renames it the ‘myth of the mental’, meaning that mindedness is all pervasive and inescapable.

So for McDowell concepts are somehow supposed to be playing a role in the whole of perception, even if one is not conscious of how this happens. Dreyfus’s point is that this is also an assumption entertained both by cognitivist practitioners and knowledge engineers alike: in some way, rules and concepts become unconscious when expert knowledge arrives.¹ On the contrary, Dreyfus has it that “our experience suggests that rules are like training wheels. We may need such aids when learning to ride a bicycle, but we must eventually set them aside if we are to become skilled cyclists” (2005, 52). The same should be said of concepts and logical schemes. Moreover, adds Dreyfus,

to assume that the rules we once consciously followed become unconscious is like assuming that, when we finally learn to ride a bike, the training wheels that were required for us to be able to ride in the first place must have become invisible. The actual phenomenon suggests that to become experts we must switch from detached rule-following to a more involved and situation-specific way of coping. (*idem*)

Unlike this assumed theoretical primacy of rule-following in coping (by means of which instructions are regarded as being internalized as if stored in the mind), in habitual human experience “the learner develops a way of coping in which reasons play no role” (Dreyfus 2005, 53). When an expert is required to give an account of how she does what she does so well, she is then forced to render a reasoned explanation of how what she does is accomplished, but this account necessarily involves “a *rationalization* that shows at best that the expert can retrieve from memory the general principles and tactical rules she once followed as a competent performer” (Dreyfus 2005, 54). However, this is an exhibition of competence but not of performance. In order to support this point, Dreyfus draws on Heidegger’s idea that in performance what is first and foremost given is “the ‘for writing’, the ‘for going in and out’, the ‘for sitting’. That is, writing, going in and out, sitting, and the like are what we are *a priori* involved with. What we know when we know our way around” (GA 21, 144). As a matter of fact, there is something about involved dealings with the world which implies a nonthematic comportment. But this nonthematic and nontheoretical way of finding our way in the world does

¹ Reference is made here to Dreyfus’s critique of artificial reason (Dreyfus 1992) and knowledge engineering (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986).

not immediately imply blindness, which seems to be McDowell's Kantian preoccupation that mere intuitions are blind as if wholly bereft of sight or reasoned orientation. Thus Dreyfus is puzzled about how something given, which is nonconceptual, could be transformed into a given with conceptual content (2005, 59). Although we share some common qualities with other animals, what makes us special is the fact that "we can *transform* our unthinking nonconceptual engagement, and thereby encounter new, thinkable, structures" (2005, 60). That is to say, "our ground-level coping opens up the world by opening us to a meaningful Given—a Given that is *nonconceptual* but not *bare*" (2005, 55). Therefore, only because the ground floor of absorbed, nonconceptual, nonthematic coping constitutes our basic being-in-the-world, it is possible to form beliefs, make judgements, justify inferences and the like. So this ground floor is more fundamental than the upper floor provided to us by concepts and theories. Hence Dreyfus's insistence that mindedness surely grows out of being-in-the-world and not conversely (2005, 61).

What is more, the involved copier does not even have to pay attention to what she is doing, let alone adopt a theoretical sense of the situation when coping. Instead of conceiving of the background of action as mental representations, theoretical observations, or monitoring attitudes, Dreyfus urges us to think of it as a space of motivations calling the copier's attention to act upon a situation by being solicited to get a grip on what is currently going on (2005, 56-57). Therefore, absorbed coping can be best described by Gibson's concept of 'affordance'. According to Gibson,

an affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of the behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points to both ways, to the environment and to the observer. (1986, 129)

This is Gibson's crucial idea: rather than perceiving determinate objects and then represent them as affording certain possibilities for action—as traditional philosophy of mind would hold—what we actually perceive is the affordances themselves. We perceive the possibilities for action and are solicited by them. On the traditional (cognitivist) view, perception is categorizing and classifying, but as Nöe has argued: "Gibson's own theory of affordances was advanced as an alternative to this perception-as-classification idea. This is what he had in mind when he said that we see affordances directly" (2013, 183). Affordances—inasmuch as they are not objects but the in-between interaction in which no subject nor object is involved—reside neither in the objective world nor in our heads as mental representations or conceptual schemes.

However, McDowell has it that human experience is pervasively informed by the conceptual capacities that belong to rationality. Accordingly, "something similar holds for our intentional action" (McDowell 2007a, 338). Knowledge is thus conceptual all the way right down to intentional action and perception. This is why even unreflective bodily coping is informed by rationality (*idem*), which means that embodied coping must be considered as permeated with mindedness (2007a, 339). So Dreyfus is right when claiming that McDowell finds rationality and mindedness everywhere. On McDowell's account, however, this should not mean that rationality is essentially detached from particular situations, as if mindedness could only be regarded as abstraction from situated knowledge. So there need not be any essential

connection between rationality and situation-independence. On McDowell's understanding of practical rationality, "affordances are no longer merely input to a human animal's natural motivational tendencies; now they are data for her rationality" (2007a, 344). McDowell does not deny the existence of affordances, solicitations to act upon situations, or skillful coping. But they are nonetheless intelligible, and hence rational. We do not just go around in the world unmotivated, as if not informed by rational goals and pursuits. Moreover,

our relation to the world, including our perceptual relation to it, is pervasively shaped by our conceptual mindedness. An implication of this for perceptual content can be put like this: if a perceptual experience is world-disclosing, as opposed to belonging to the kind of coping with a mere environment that figures in the lives of creatures lacking orientation towards the world, any aspect of its content is present in a form in which it is suitable to constitute the content of a conceptual capacity. (2007a, 346)

As far as McDowell is concerned, when perceiving, human beings are not involved in mere irrational dealings because perception itself is world-disclosing and therefore actively intelligible. Given the fact that perceivers can reflect upon what they are doing, and considering that every act of perception is intelligible when experienced, why are we to think that skillful coping is somehow not pervaded with rationality? What is irrational about it? What is mythical about it? For McDowell "the real myth in the neighborhood is the thought that makes it look as if affirming the pervasiveness of conceptual rationality will not cohere with giving proper weight to the bodily character of our lives" (2007a, 349). So McDowell strikes back: this is the "myth of the disembodied intellect" to which Dreyfus falls prey (*idem*).

The Missing Link. In the subsequent responses belonging to this heated debate (Dreyfus 2007a; McDowell 2007b; Dreyfus 2007b; Dreyfus 2013; McDowell 2013), the differences laid bare deepen even more, with Dreyfus defending the claim that conceptual articulated mindedness is actually the enemy of embodied coping (2007a, 353). Although lamenting having carelessly foisted on McDowell the idea of a disembodied intellect, Dreyfus sticks to the view that mindedness, "far from being a pervasive and essential feature of human being, is the result of a specific transformation of our pervasive *mindless* coping" (2007a, 353). Perception is not primarily conceptual because the world, as the background of experience, is not a whole of interconnected facts and propositional attitudes that one resorts to, but instead "the totality of interconnected solicitations that attract or repulse" (Dreyfus 2007a, 357). When coping in the world, the coper finds herself caught in a web of attractions, repulsions, and solicitations to act upon what needs to be pursued and carried out, not within the context of propositional attitudes and capacities to step back and monitor activity. Far from it, an explicit propositional take on things is but an exception in everyday coping. Our relation to the world is "more primordial than our mind's being open to apperceiving categorically unified facts" (Dreyfus 2007a, 359). As a matter of fact, "this objective world and its conceptual order presupposes a pre-objective/pre-subjective world" (Dreyfus 2007a, 360). The ground floor, whose capacities are fundamentally heterogeneous with reason, consists of a pre-linguistic horizon which is always presupposed when a minded attitude arrives (Dreyfus 2005, 47).

However, if the discussion is framed along similar lines—Dreyfus claiming the powers of a nonrational relation to the world—everything certainly leads to confusion, as if being-in-the-world were some kind of irrational stance.² So the question concerning rationality must be raised. In this regard, the question can be formulated as follows: are we essentially rational animals? (Dreyfus 2007c). The discussion between Dreyfus and McDowell can be summarized in that the former answers no, whereas McDowell asserts that rationality is what constitutes human being in its very core. Schear points out that, for McDowell, “experience, *so far as it matters for rational knowledge of objective reality*, cannot be nonconceptual” (2013, 287), that is to say, rationality turns out to be the proper background of the foreground of human activity. On this account, being rational means to be endowed with a set of conceptual capacities. Rational (conceptual) capacities in this manner are ‘in play’, or ‘permeate’ or are ‘operative’ in our intelligible human activity (Schear 2013, 290). Dreyfus seems to construe this permeation of rational capacities brought forward by McDowell as the constant exercise of an abstract monitoring perspective on activity, which causes a subject/object fission and thus a change of attitude in coping. Besides, Dreyfus might have in mind the mental representation view of concepts (that they are psychological entities), which is the default position in cognitive science and the philosophy of mind (Pinker 1994; Carruthers 1996; Margolis & Laurence 1999).

Against Dreyfus it could be argued that capacities are not exhausted by their being exerted on occasion. On the contrary, it could be held that they are pervasive inasmuch as they are at the same time general. I might have the capacity to jump, or do pirouettes, but these and other capacities can well be regarded as pervasive inasmuch as they remain part of what I can do, only being activated and put into practice whenever I need to exercise them as such. From this follows that this pervasiveness “does not entail the constant de facto exercise of the capacity” (Schear 2013, 291). From the fact that human agents can be characterized by rationality—the latter being a pervasive feature of their lives—does not necessarily follow that an abstract capacity is being exerted while practical activities are in play. This is indeed a weak reading of the ‘venerable thesis’ (the thesis which ascribes rationality to human agents as their most essential feature, Schear 2013, 285), since being endowed with rationality is not the same as claiming that humans are always rational, nor that they are always monitoring their coping activities, nor even that they are constantly aware of what they are doing. It should be apparent that this detached idea of rationality is not the one which McDowell has in mind when conceiving of human agents as rational beings. In fact, rationality can only be pictured as disrupting the flow of coping in the world if it is simultaneously understood as exercised in a stepping-back, monitoring attitude towards what is being done. However, “the question is whether rationality *qua* capacity is pervasive, where its pervasiveness does not consist in the process of an ongoing constant exercise (which would indeed be inimical to flow)” (Schear 2013, 292). Therefore, if conceived as a general human capacity in the aforementioned sense, rationality is not to be obfuscated by reducing it to a mere monitoring observation of one’s own activity. This is admittedly McDowell’s central claim against Dreyfus, or against what he now

² Although Dreyfus seems to ignore it, his idea that there is an essential human dimension which is not entirely rational might ensue from a rather traditional identification between life and the irrational. This idea has cavorted the pages of transcendental philosophy since Kant (Baeumler 1967) and it might be due, as Molina suggests, to the ambiguity of the concept of life that one can find already in Kant’s philosophy (Molina 2010).

calls ‘the myth of the mind as detached’, to which Dreyfus inevitably succumbs. According to McDowell,

the idea is not that our experiential knowledge is always the result of determining what reason requires us to think about some question. Normally when experience provides us with knowledge that such and such is the case, we simply find ourselves in possession of the knowledge; we do not get into that position by wondering whether such and such is the case and judging that it is. When I say that the knowledge experience yields to rational subjects is of a kind that is special to rational subjects, I mean that in such knowledge, capacities of the sort that *can* figure in that kind of intellectual activity are in play, not that a subject who has such knowledge on the basis of experience is in that position as a result of actually engaging in that kind of intellectual activity. (2013, 42)

Be that as it may, Schear (2013, 293 ff.) brings to bear another Dreyfusian counterargument against McDowell, the so-called argument of merging: the idea that in the flow of skillful activity, the copier cannot be easily distinguished as a subject dealing with objects. On the contrary, as in the often quoted passage from Merleau-Ponty’s *The Structure of Behavior*, Dreyfus underscores the merging character of absorbed coping, whereupon, say, a football player becomes rather one with the field: “the field itself is not given... the player becomes one with it” (Merleau-Ponty 1966, 168). Dreyfus’s vocabulary about the experience of absorbed coping is decisively nonobjective, because a vortex of forces in which attractions and repulsions constitute the field of activity is not objective in the sense of being merely present for theoretical inspection. Conversely, theoretical inspection is possible only on the basis of this vortex of forces giving shape to our bodily and skillful familiarity with the world. As a matter of fact, Dreyfus distinguishes a background coping from a foreground coping: “the familiar background coping can support a foreground coping in which the ‘I do’ is operative” (2013, 28). For Dreyfus, not even the I, not even subjectivity in the form of an Ego, is operative in the background. Such an Ego, it seems, is also too abstract for Dreyfus, who prefers conceiving of human beings in primordial coping as substantially involved and absorbed, out of themselves rather than encapsulated in a subjective consciousness. However, this dismissal of subjectivity might turn out to be nonphenomenological altogether, since “the level of absorbed coping involves a dimension of self-experience—at least in so far as that level is supposed to be experiential rather than simply a matter of nonconscious automaticity” (Zahavi 2013, 326). On Zahavi’s view, this absence of subjectivity in Dreyfus’s conception of skillful coping makes him sound somewhat like Dennett, “the moment that Dennett reaches the conclusion that our commonsense self-ascription of mental states is persistently mistaken” (2013, 322).

It is no doubt a central plank of Dreyfus’s description of skillful coping that the background “goes all the way up to engulf the foreground” (*idem*), meaning that absorbed copiers are as if under a spell in their being-in-the-world.³ In this way, the merging character of absorbed coping precludes the presentation of determinate objects, since objects can only be presented as

³ Merleau-Ponty’s words come to mind: “the orator does not think before speaking, not even while speaking; his speech is his thought. The end of the speech or text will be the lifting of a spell” (Merleau-Ponty 2005, 209).

such—etymologically: can be put before or against the eyes—when a change of attitude not compatible with absorbed activity arises: “only when things are not developing normally and no alternative perspective directly draws the copier to replace the current one, does the copier have to represent a goal and deliberate as to how to reach it” (Dreyfus 2013, 30). Therefore, for Dreyfus it turns out to be futile to do exactly otherwise and foist on objects a primacy, when actually the converse is true: objects are only secondary or derivative, for they arise from a background whose nature is precisely nonobjective. Dreyfus quotes Heidegger: “precisely in order to experience *what* and *how* beings in each case *are* in themselves as the beings that they *are*, we must—although not conceptually—already understand something like the what-being and that-being of beings” (GA 29/30, 519). Objective understanding is thus preceded by a nonobjective pre-understanding serving as the primordial background out of which present-at-hand objects can be discovered for the foreground, not the other way around.

However, Dreyfus’s idea that absorbed coping would not be graspable by rationality is controversial, for it is one thing to say that coping is nonconceptual (inasmuch as nontheoretical) and another to claim that it is irrational! Although Dreyfus takes pains to prove the phenomenological character of this idea, a series of critical questions should be raised, since some of Dreyfus’s ideas on phenomenology—appearances notwithstanding—quarrel explicitly with some fundamental phenomenological insights. In this vein, one could ask: Is absorbed coping irrational because nonconceptual? What does it actually mean to say that “while the background coping is largely unthought, it is not unthinkable” (Dreyfus 2013, 27)? Can it then be reflected upon with concepts? If not, how? Is there a way to refer to it without at the same time deforming it by means of interrupting its natural flow (which seems to be what Dreyfus would hold)? It remains to be shown that some implications deriving from Dreyfus’s treatment of the background and its purported absolute nonconceptual nature are rather orthogonal to key phenomenological ideas.

Despite Dreyfus’s constant use of Heidegger’s philosophy, the contrast between rationalism and irrationalism is not always the most felicitous to be adopted, at least from a Heideggerian standpoint. Indeed, according to Heidegger, “when irrationalism, as the counterplay of rationalism, talks about the things to which rationalism is blind, it does so only with a squint” (SZ, 136). Indeed, there is a phenomenological dimension, that of experiencing (*erleben*) as the provenance of understanding, “with which one does not know what to do, and for which the convenient title of the irrational has been invented” (Heidegger GA 56/57, 117). Heidegger indeed deactivates the efficaciousness of the traditional distinction between the rational and the irrational precisely because it is only brought forth in a theoretical stance, from whence it—and many other such distinctions—emerges. Dreyfus is no doubt right in that, in most cases when being asked about it, the agent that thematizes about her coping activity tends to transform the practical, skillful field, so that it is modified inasmuch as referred to as if from without (and, to a certain extent, by replacing thus lived experience with *a posteriori* reflection upon it). The holistic background certainly appears bereft of all its meaning and thus impoverished if it is treated as a mere set of facts about objects and its properties. This means that what beclouds lived experience is the adoption of that which the young Heidegger (GA 56/67, 87) designated as the primacy of the theoretical (*Generalherrschaft des Theoretischen* or *Primat des Theoretischen*). But it must be stressed that it is a mistake to make of the background

something atheoretical or irrational in the sense of wholly obscure and—as it were—mystical. Heidegger has dealt with this claim by laying out the nonthematic contours of practical behavior:

‘Practical behavior’ is not ‘atheoretical’ in the sense of ‘sightlessness’. The way it differs from theoretical behavior does not lie simply in the fact that in theoretical behavior one observes, while in practical behavior one *acts*, and that action must employ theoretical cognition if it is not to remain blind; for the fact that observation is a kind of concern is just as primordial as the fact that action has *its own* kind of sight. Theoretical behavior is just looking, without circumspection. [...] The ready-to-hand is not grasped theoretically at all, nor is it itself the sort of thing that circumspection takes proximally as a circumspective theme. (SZ, 69)

It should be observed that this is not the same as understanding absorbed coping as blind, irrational or ineffable, as does Schear: “the field of attractions and repulsions is... literally unthinkable, at least for the discursive intellect, and in a sense then, ineffable” (2013, 298). Schear’s subsequent conclusion is also dubious: “if Dreyfus’s phenomenology of merging is faithful, then he has identified a form of activity that falls outside the reach of our power of rationality and its characteristic material, namely determinate objects fit to figure in reasons” (*idem*). Rather, Dreyfus has discovered a field as such ignored by traditional cognitive approaches, since the fundamental mistake in mainstream philosophy of mind is conceiving of the foreground of constituted objects without any trace of the background that enables this constitution. On Heidegger’s view at least, the distinction between theory and praxis is also a misbegotten conception. Moreover, if the background is—as Dreyfus asserts—nonpropositional and nontheoretical, that is, if it is always presupposed in every propositional and theoretical stance, the whole enterprise of confusing the two floors appears as the consequence of a category mistake: an error “in which things of one kind are presented as if they belonged to another” (Blackburn 2005, 58). In this case, ‘things’ whose character is essentially nonobjective being presented as if they belonged to the objective realm of facts. Thus things go astray when the background is purely understood in terms of objective or logical relations.

However, there are two claims espoused by Dreyfus which are hardly phenomenological which should immediately be dealt with. In the first place, let us be reminded of the fact that lived experience—unlike Dreyfus’s much preferred examples of everyday dealings with equipment and skillful coping in sports—is much more ample than just practical activity. Dreyfus’s exclusive interest in Division I of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (Dreyfus 1991) speaks in favor of understanding his interpretative attempts as a sort of ‘pragmatization of phenomenology’, in which skillful coping plays a major role. As Braver (2013) has shown, Dreyfus also applies the emphasis on skillful coping he drew from Division I to the second part of Heidegger’s *magnum opus*, missing thus the fundamental Heideggerian shift of accentuation: “Division II’s authenticity [*Eigentlichkeit*] presents something of an *Aufhebung* of Division I’s antithesis by marrying coping’s engagement to theory’s attentiveness. [Heidegger] consistently worries about a familiar behavior’s tendency to lull us into autopilot, a state he calls fallenness and consistently connects to the unthematic absorption in the world that is Dreyfus’s highest state” (Braver 2013, 146). In point of fact, Heidegger asserts that “that in which concern has *fallen* at any given time is not thematically perceived, not thought, not known, and it is just this

which grounds the possibility of an *original reality*” (GA 20, 263). Also, in a previous university lecture, Heidegger speaks of a tendency to forget oneself as *Ruinanz* (GA 61, 121). Heidegger himself specifically warned against this pragmatist line of construing his philosophy, which reduces it to mere practical everyday activity:

I attempted in *Being and Time* to provide a preliminary characterization of the *phenomenon of world* by interpreting the *way in which we at first and for the most part move about in our everyday world*. There I took my departure from what lies to hand in the everyday realm, from those things that we use and pursue, indeed in such a way that we do not really know of the peculiar character proper to such activity, and when we try to describe it we immediately misinterpret it by applying concepts and questions that have their source elsewhere. That which is so close and intelligible to us in our everyday dealings is actually and fundamentally remote and unintelligible to us. In and through this initial characterization of the phenomenon of world the task is to press on and point out the phenomenon of world as a problem. It never occurred to me, however, to try and claim or prove with this interpretation that the essence of man consists in the fact that he knows how to handle knives and forks or use the tram. (GA 29/30, 262-263)

It must be noted that, while in the context of criticizing the pristine AI research program Dreyfus’s recourse to practical dealings is understandable (1992), his subsequent pragmatization of the background causes a rather extravagant and unnecessary split, “where the body is intelligent precisely where the mind is stupid and vice versa” (Braver 2013, 152). This conceptual/nonconceptual split is even regarded as “two separate ways of being open to the world” (Dreyfus 2007c, 108). The question is, of course, how these two spheres connect with each other. Moreover, is Dreyfus introducing the well-known dualism between the object of knowledge and the subject which can never be explicitly known, since referring to it would objectify it? According to Dreyfus’s phraseology, this is the problem of explaining “how the *nonconceptual given is converted into a given with conceptual content*” (2005, 59). Or, as was formulated otherwise, “how the ground floor of pure perception and receptive coping supports the conceptual upper storeys of the edifice of knowledge” (2005, 19). While Dreyfus holds that this fission between a nonconceptual given and conceptual content must somehow be connected, a phenomenological (Heideggerian) admonition could be applied to it: “is there really this division and separation... between the given (giveable) and the description? Are we not succumbing here to a deception of language, and in fact a theoreticized language?” (GA 56/57, 111-112). As Zahavi has argued in explaining Husserlian phenomenology: “to detach sense and the sensuous (*Sinn* and *Sinnlichkeit*) from each other, to deny the continuity between the perceptual givens of an object and its predicative articulation, is to make the relation between conceptual thinking and perception incomprehensible and contingent” (2003, 29).

In addition, there is another objection to Dreyfus’s interpretation of the background that is also problematic from the phenomenological point of view: namely, his demand that the coping background be untouched by any conceptual reference to it under the risk of being distorted. Isn’t Dreyfus proceeding with concepts as well when investigating the scope of skillful coping?

Or to put it bluntly, how does he know that ‘skillful coping’ as conceptual label does not modify and alter skillful coping itself?

Dreyfus incidentally seems to succumb to a classical objection against phenomenological philosophy (Natorp [2013] comes to mind) which both Husserl and Heidegger dismissed outright (Husserl *Hua III*, § 79; Heidegger *GA 56/57*). In this vein, it bears reminding that this was also Searle’s so-called ‘bankruptcy of phenomenology’ criticism: that it deals with how things seem to me here and now in the *immediate present* (Searle 2001, 282); a sort of precarious introspective view lacking scientific importance. According to this criticism, this is precisely what would render phenomenology a flawed philosophical endeavor from the very outset of its investigative journey. Thus, the *peccatum originale* of phenomenology would be its false aspiration to provide access to pure subjectivity, while objectifying subjectivity in the very process. In a nutshell: by naming lived experience we do not gain immediate access to it, precisely because all conceptual rendering is reflective, objectifying, and generalizing. Dreyfus’s serious dereliction in this regard is no doubt bequeathed by a flawed interpretation of phenomenology.

Conclusion. It remains a matter of discussion if Heidegger’s hermeneutical approach (his alternative to Husserl’s phenomenological reflection) provides the appropriate access to lived experience.⁴ Dreyfus, of course, does not neglect the possibility of referring to embodied, embedded, experience and he resorts to a terminology (lines of force, attractions and repulsions, etc.) when giving an account of everyday skillful coping. In spite of that, his frequent parlance of the modification of skillful coping by concepts, and his preoccupation that it be thus deformed, shows a certain similarity to the classical objections that phenomenology cannot gain access to pre-theoretical experience as such.

But it is even more important to note that Dreyfus’s demand of a detailed account with regard to the transition from the nonconceptual background to the conceptual foreground is hardly phenomenological at all. This demand is made precisely because Dreyfus—to use Husserlian terminology—sees a discontinuity between lived experience and reflection. But even from a Heideggerian standpoint, this Dreyfusian discontinuity is flawed and nonphenomenological, since practical activity is not blind, it has its own circumspective involved sight (*Umsicht*). Moreover, in order for Dreyfus to maintain this discontinuity of spheres, he has mistakenly understood Heidegger, for example, when he foists on the German thinker the following idea: “Heidegger points out that most of our activities don’t involve concepts at all. That is, they don’t have a situation specific ‘as-structure’” (2007b, 371). On the contrary, the structure of *etwas als etwas* is, for Heidegger, pervasive: “every act of having something in front of oneself and perceiving it is, in and of itself, a ‘having’ something as something... However, this as-structure is not necessarily related to predication. In dealing with something, I do not perform any thematic predicative assertions” (*GA 21*, 17). Indeed, “that which is disclosed in understanding—that which is understood—is already accesible in such a way that its ‘as which’

⁴ For Herrmann (2000) it does. For Zahavi, the contrast between reflective phenomenology and hermeneutical phenomenology is merely artificial: “[hermeneutical phenomenology] remains a reflective enterprise, as long as we simply operate with a sufficiently broad notion of reflection” (2003, 170). See also Zahavi (2006) on Heidegger’s ‘agenda’: “his own reasons for wanting to emphasize his own originality vis-à-vis his old teacher.”

can be made to stand out explicitly. The ‘as’ makes up the structure of the explicitness of something that is understood” (SZ, 149).⁵ This sounds strikingly close to McDowell’s idea that world-disclosing “is present in a form in which it is suitable to constitute the content of a conceptual capacity” (2007a, 346). Indeed, there are certain McDowellian ideas that sometimes seem much more phenomenological than Dreyfus’s.

Heidegger’s treatment of the ‘as’, on the one hand, explains his notable dissatisfaction with reflection, for it relinquishes the realization of vitality (*Vollzugslebendigkeit*) to the benefit of a mere presence (*ein reines Dastehen*). It is not at all self-evident that the things in question are given only in the form of their constituted objectification. Heidegger is dismissive of a Husserlian project which he judges as being guided by the traditional and metaphysical question as to how consciousness can become the object of an absolute science. On Heidegger’s view, this guiding question is not a Husserlian invention after all but rather “the idea that concerned *modern* philosophy since Descartes” (GA 20, 147).⁶

Be that as it may, it must be clear that some methodological measures are to be strictly undertaken in phenomenology. Phenomenology’s tendency not towards constituted objects but rather towards the conditions of possibility of knowledge in general has undeniably given the impression that, inasmuch as an enterprise for the description of nonobjective phenomena, its importance for science is rather questionable. As is widely known, phenomenology requires, for Husserl, “an antinatural habitus of seeing [*Anschauungs-*] and thinking [*Denkrichtung*]” (Hua XIX/1, 14), which does not consider the objects but rather the acts that underlie them. These Husserlian methodological measures imply an abrupt suspension of naïve metaphysical opinions (*epoché*), which is actually the first step in entering philosophy, that is, the entrance gate (*Eingangstor*) to the phenomenological sphere (Hua VI, 260). In addition, a reduction (*Reduktion*) is called forth that will enable the thematization of the correlation between subjectivity and world (Hua I, 61).

In the final analysis, Dreyfus’s theory of the pre-theoretical background remains somewhat muddled. Actually, the radical split that he espouses between perception and conceptuality, along with the disappearance of subjectivity in his characterization of absorbed coping, might turn out to be nonphenomenological altogether. Dreyfus is certainly on the right track when he inveighs against equivocating pre-theoretical experience with any objective rendering of it. However, driving a wedge between a nonconceptual given and conceptual rationality creates the artificial problem of trying to connect both spheres, as if the background were ultimately a mystery (Dreyfus, 2012). However, there is not a shred of evidence that the clarification of such ineffable mysterious stance was part of the original scope of phenomenological research as devised by its very founders. To the contrary, both Husserl and Heidegger rejected time and again such characterization of phenomenological philosophy and

⁵ “... das *ausdrücklich* Verstandene, hat die Struktur des *Etwas als Etwas*” (SZ, 149).

⁶ What is more: “Die Herausarbeitung des reinen Bewußtseins als thematisches Feld der Phänomenologie ist *nicht phänomenologisch im Rückgang auf die Sachen selbst* gewonnen, sondern im Rückgang auf eine traditionelle Idee der Philosophie” (Heidegger GA 20, 147).

offered reasons justifying the inadequacy of conceiving of pre-theoretical experience as such irrational dimension, whose access were fatally denied to philosophical research.⁷

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