

BEYOND MYTHOLOGY: UNDERSTANDING THE MCDOWELL-DREYFUS
DEBATE

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by

Justin Michael Masters

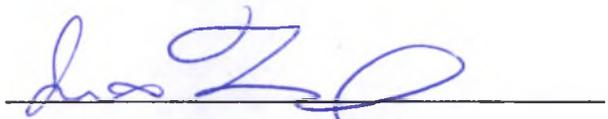
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Beyond Mythology: Understanding the McDowell-Dreyfus Debate* by Justin Michael Masters, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of arts: Philosophy at San Francisco State University.



Mohammad Azadpur, Ph.D
Professor



David Landy, Ph.D
Professor

BEYOND MYTHOLOGY: UNDERSTANDING THE MCDOWELL-DREYFUS
DEBATE

Justin Michael Masters
San Francisco, California
2018

In this thesis I examine the debate between John McDowell and Hubert Dreyfus. I narrow the debate down to what I believe is its most fundamental concern: the extent to which conceptual rationality plays a role in our skillful engagement with the world. I provide an exposition of the main arguments presented by each thinker in an attempt to lead the reader to a clearer understanding of the debate. I side with McDowell, I claim that his distinction between two psychological states enables him to successfully rebut Dreyfus' strongest critique, and provide a coherent account of the mind-world relation.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Chair, Thesis Committee

10/11/18

Date

Introduction

In his influential book *Mind and World*, John McDowell seeks to give a plausible explanation of how adult humans are able to transition from the perceptual experience of the world, to engagement in discursive activities such as belief formation and knowledge acquisition. He there makes the controversial claim that conceptual rationality is pervasively involved in the perceptual experience of adult human subjects.¹

In his 2005 American Philosophical Association presidential address, *Overcoming the Myth of the Mental*, Hubert Dreyfus disputes McDowell's pervasiveness claim on the grounds that it denies a more primordial mode of perceptual engagement with the world that is devoid of conceptual activity of any kind. Dreyfus accuses McDowell of going too far in his attempt to avoid the Myth of the Given (according to McDowell, the idea that Given perceptible objects are cognizable by a subject without drawing on her rational capacities²). This, according to Dreyfus, causes McDowell to subscribe to another "mythical" idea (the Myth of the Mental), which he expresses as the idea that pure perception is impossible; therefore, perception and coping must always already be conceptual in some way.

The central issue of the debate between McDowell and Dreyfus is the extent to which conceptual rationality plays a role in our skillful embodied engagement with the world; it ultimately hinges on the question of how experiential content is able to play a justificatory role in belief formation and knowledge acquisition. For Dreyfus, the description of how justification is possible amounts to an explanation of how "the non-conceptual given [content]

¹McDowell 1996, p. 25

²McDowell 2009, p. 256. McDowell adapts this definition of the "Myth of the Given"(MOG) from Wilfrid Sellars' work to dispel the (MOG)—"without resorting to a dogmatic form of empiricism"—in his celebrated essay, *Empiricism and The Philosophy of Mind*. Note, the capitalization of the word "Given", which is meant to distinguish it from the non-mythical use of the term i.e. "given".

is converted to into a given with conceptual content”.³ McDowell on the other hand wants to avoid the anxiety that would accompany the mind-bending task of explaining how the content of non-conceptual, perceptual experience, is formed into the conceptual content that provides the framework upon which we come to adopt beliefs about, or acquire knowledge from, our perceptual experiences. McDowell aims to show that the possibility of giving reasons for one’s actions, or of providing epistemic justification, is contingent on it being the case that conceptual rationality extends all the way through to even the most basic level of perceptual experience.

In the first section of this paper I will summarize Dreyfus’ strongest critique of McDowell’s conceptualism and explain why it presents a challenge for McDowell. In the second section I will argue that McDowell’s view is not vulnerable to Dreyfus’ critique, and explain how McDowell is able to meet the challenge that is put to him by Dreyfus. In the third section I will draw from some of McDowell’s ethical works in order to provide a more detailed explanation of why McDowell’s view is invulnerable to Dreyfus’ critique. I will conclude by summarizing my argument, and giving some further reasons to accept that McDowell provides a more coherent account of the relation between mind and world than Dreyfus does. But first, I want to provide a brief explanation of the thinking behind McDowell’s pervasiveness claim.

i. McDowell’s Conceptualist Approach

McDowell’s stated goal in *Mind and World* was to provide an account of the relation between mind and world that avoids succumbing to both the Myth of the Given, and the “frictionless spinning in a void” that is characteristic of an idealism not grounded in an objective reality. For McDowell, a coherent account of how a mental state can be directed

³Dreyfus “Overcoming the Myth of the Mental,” p. 61.

towards the world—as it is putatively regarded that beliefs and judgments are—should explain the mental state’s relation to the external world in a normative context. This means that a belief or judgment that the world is a certain way (one which corresponds to experience) should be explained in the context that such mental states could be thought of as adhering, or not adhering, to the world as it actually is. This view—which McDowell refers to as “a minimal empiricism”⁴—is sufficient to ground our judgments and beliefs in an objective reality, in the sense that such mental states are considered by him to be “answerable to the empirical world; that is, answerable to how things are in so far as how things are empirically accessible”.⁵ For McDowell, we understand the notion that our thinking is related to the world by way of the idea that our thinking is answerable to experience, that all hinges on the view that objective reality is accessible—In some capacity—to the mind in our perceptual experience of the world.

If we are to understand the answerability of thinking to experience in normative terms, (i.e. as concerning knowledge in terms of adherence to reality) then on McDowell’s account, we are not giving an empirical description of a mental state; rather, we are placing it in what Wilfrid Sellars referred to as “the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says”.⁶ The point is that in order for there to be this kind of answerability, there must be some involvement by the mind in experience itself because, the idea of answerability only figures within the logical space of reasons. Thus, the view that conceptual capacities are not only operative in judgments and beliefs, but also in transactions with the world (i.e. experience) gives McDowell the conceptual elbow room to provide a coherent account of the mind-world relation in that he avoids succumbing to the Myth of the Given.

⁴ McDowell, *Mind and World*; p. xii.

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid*

1. Dreyfus' Phenomenological Critique

Dreyfus' most efficacious criticism of McDowell's conceptualism is his phenomenological critique in which he argues that the phenomenon of skillful, embodied-coping reveals that conceptual activity actually degrades performance. Dreyfus particularly goes after McDowell's notion of subjectivity: that we as adult humans enjoy an openness⁷ to the world that is unique to rational agents. Dreyfus argues that once we pass the level of mere involvement, and reach a state of total absorption in activity, there is no longer occasion for the type of subjective awareness that is indicative of an agent monitoring her activity. Absorbed-coping is, according to Dreyfus, a state that is entirely absent of an ego, as well as the kind of mental activity involved in monitoring one's performance. This he argues, is corroborated by the many examples of experts being reduced to a level of mere competence in a particular skill, or losing the ability to perform the skill altogether as they become detached from the concrete situation when assuming a deliberative state of mind.⁸

Dreyfus considers McDowell's account to be inconsistent with the phenomenon because of the particular way that he (McDowell) views the world, and conceives of our openness to it. For Dreyfus, McDowell's view is that we are directly open to facts about the world, so that even affordances are regarded as facts about our relation to the world, such as e.g. water affords drinking. Dreyfus contends that what we are directly open to is not rational or conceptual; rather, we are open to affordances in the form of solicitations, ones which draw on us to act in certain ways that are particular to the concrete situation. On this account, one is directly drawn to drink water when one is thirsty, and one is open to such a solicitation because she is in a particular state that allows for a certain type of receptivity i.e.

⁷For a description of the concept of openness see Ibid, p.24.

⁸Dreyfus, Response to McDowell. pp. 373,374.

the state of thirst. So “world” on Dreyfus’ account means the totality of interrelated solicitations that show up as either attractive or repulsive forces.⁹ Therefore, according to Dreyfus’ view, the interrelated solicitations that constitute a “world” cannot be separated from our capacity to be directly solicited.

Dreyfus claims that McDowell’s account only gives us two ways of thinking about embodied coping, neither of which matches the phenomenon: a meaningless bodily movement, or an action that is undertaken by a subject for a specific reason.¹⁰ In response to the first alternative, Dreyfus argues that the phenomenon shows us that our actions cannot be thought of as meaningless because, they are normative in the sense that the body is always positioning itself to get the best possible grip on the particular situation in question. And, in response to the latter alternative, he argues that the phenomenon shows us that the body has its own type of intentional response mechanism, which is better equipped to navigate the web of interrelated solicitations that the world is.¹¹ This type of motor intentional response is shown by the phenomenon, according to Dreyfus, to be disrupted by the type of discursive activity that is contemplating reasons for one’s actions.

On Dreyfus’ account, the picture that jibes with the phenomenon is one in which rationality is made possible by a systematically ordered network of solicitations working in the background, ones which draw on the non-rational motivational responses of a perceiver. The idea here is that an always-operative background network of solicitations, which is not conceptually structured, serves as the foundation upon which discursive activity can have a link to the world, and be grounded in it. Furthermore, according to Dreyfus, it is only when one is not capable of being solicited in such a way as to exhibit one’s peak performance that

⁹ Dreyfus, *The Return of The Myth of the Mental*; pp. 356-358.

¹⁰ Dreyfus, *Overcoming The Myth of the Mental*; pp. 56,57.

¹¹ *Ibid*; p.57.

one becomes aware of one's agency, and needs to consciously monitor the situation, or take a reflective stance.¹²

To sum up, Dreyfus' strongest criticisms of McDowell's pervasiveness claim are centered on the phenomenological critique that conceptual rationality is disruptive to the peak performance of practical activity that is exemplified by our capacity for absorbed-coping. Dreyfus tells us that McDowell's account leaves us with only two ways of thinking about embodied coping, both of which are undesirable in that neither one matches the phenomenon. It seems to me that Dreyfus is unwilling to accept that conceptual rationality is operative at even the most basic level of perceptual experience because for him, concepts figure as features of discursive exercises, which have no place in our practical activity and so, disrupt the performance of such activity. He maintains that our focus should be on making sense of how we—as predominantly practical beings—convert purely perceptual, non-conceptual content, into conceptual content.¹³

Dreyfus' phenomenological argument should be taken seriously because, it presents the challenge of detailing a theory of the relation between mind and world that harmonizes with the putatively agreed upon phenomenon. Presented with such a challenge, McDowell should be able to explain how it is that rationality is not inexorably linked to detachment, and provide a coherent account of how conceptual mindedness can be pervasive in the perceptual experience of adult human beings without degrading performance. I think McDowell does just that: he provides an account of the mind-world relation that makes sense of the phenomenon rather than kicking the topic down the road for a later inquiry.

2.The Invulnerability of McDowell's View to The Phenomenological Critique

¹²Dreyfus, *The Return of The Myth of the Mental*; pp. 357

¹³Dreyfus, *Overcoming The Myth of the Mental*; p.57.

In this section I want to address Dreyfus' phenomenological criticism and argue that McDowell's conceptualist view is not vulnerable to it. What is strong about Dreyfus' critique is that many of us have either experienced for ourselves, or heard about a situation in which engaging in deliberative analysis results in detachment from embodied coping. With that in mind, it seems to fit the phenomenon that conceptual rationality does degrade the performance of practical activity. However, I find that in McDowell's work on the topic there is enough evidence to make the case that for him, conceptual rationality is experienced in at least two different ways, by two distinctly oriented psychological states. In one of those psychological states conceptual rationality is experienced in the "strong" sense; it is a state McDowell describes as a "step back". That description is meant to express a perceiver's distanced relationship with the world, one that is indicative of detachment. The other psychological state is one in which conceptual rationality is operative in a way that enables a perceiver to view the solicitations of the world as reasons to act without resulting in detachment; it is also a state in which the conceptual form of a perceptual experience is preserved for use in discursive activity. Distinguishing between these two psychological states is what gives plausibility to the idea that conceptual rationality can always be operative without it resulting in the degradation of performance.

I submit that McDowell's view is not vulnerable to the phenomenological criticism. He can accept that there is a way in which deeply involved deliberation would result in detachment, and ultimately degradation of practical performance, without being obligated to accept that whenever conceptual rationality is operative, detachment necessarily follows. So, the meat of McDowell's response to the phenomenological critique is his rejection of Dreyfus' claim that rationality is inextricably linked to detachment from the state of total

absorption that makes skillful coping possible. What we can gather from his acknowledgement that conceptual rationality (in a “strong sense) leads to detachment, coupled with his rejection of the claim that conceptual rationality is necessarily antecedent to detachment, is that for McDowell, conceptual rationality is in operation regardless of whether or not a perceiver consciously engages in that type of discursive activity (i.e. to contemplate reasons for one’s actions).¹⁴ Furthermore, McDowell’s stance is that capacities belonging to a subject’s rationality are in operation even if the subject in question is not able to exercise those capacities (in the sense that the subject does not have a mastery of the proper concepts to articulate reasons for her actions).¹⁵ In this way, McDowell sets himself up to address the putative phenomenon of absorbed-coping, and to propose that there is conceptual continuity between the experiences of absorption and detachment.

We might then wonder how conceptual capacities can be operative in one’s perceptual experience even though one may not possess the means to exercise them. It seems like a strange statement to make, but it is important to understand that for McDowell, what it means for a capacity to be conceptual in the “relevant sense” is that its “content is of a form that fits it to figure in discursive activity”. Thus, we can reasonably take McDowell to be suggesting that what is operative in the perceptual experience of a rational subject is a mental capacity by which the content of a perceptual experience is conceptually situated in such a way that it is fit to figure in discursive activity.¹⁶ His stated goal is to “credit the experience of rational subjects with the epistemological significance it intuitively deserves”, but not attribute to experience alone the ability to ground knowledge or belief, thus avoiding the Myth of the

¹⁴ McDowell, Response to Dreyfus p. 366.

¹⁵ McDowell, The Myth Of The Mind As Detached; p. 43

¹⁶ It should be noted that McDowell does not suggest that experiences have propositional content; that is an assumption that he renounces. Rather, McDowell suggests that experiences are actualizations of conceptual capacities whose content is of a form that is suited to figure in discursive exercise. See McDowell, Avoiding the Myth of the Given: pp. 268-269.

Given.¹⁷ If McDowell is right about there being a particular psychological state that makes it possible for conceptual rationality to be operative in such a way that it does not result in detachment, then he has shown that the pervasiveness claim is invulnerable to the phenomenological critique. He will have also provided a link between the content of perceptual experience, and that same content as it shows up in discursive exercise—which is what his debate with Dreyfus is ultimately all about.

McDowell conceives of conceptual rationality as being uniquely expressed in the state of absorbed-coping. In absorbed-coping, according to McDowell, mindedness is specifically adapted to practical activity rather than theoretical activity. That is, conceptual rationality is uniquely accustomed to practical activity in such a way that it does not disrupt the activity at hand when operative. Thus, McDowell can accept that detachment occurs, without conceding however, that the root cause of such detachment is the involvement of the mind in practical activity.

McDowell makes his distinction between practical and theoretical mindedness explicit in his response to Dreyfus' most prominent example of rationality being responsible for the degradation of performance (i.e. the case of Chuck Knoblauch¹⁸). He argues that the Knoblauch case demonstrates a specific way in which practical intelligence becomes detached from activity. On McDowell's account, that happens when one attempts to subsume the bodily movements of a basic type of action under the purview of intention rather than under the conditions of whatever measures are necessary to perform the action in question.

This kind of loss of skill comes about when the agent's means-ends rationality tries, so to speak, to take control of the details of her bodily

¹⁷The Myth of the Mind as Detached pp. 41,42.

¹⁸See Dreyfus, *Return of the Myth of the Mental*; p. 354. Chuck Knoblauch is a former N.Y. Yankees second baseman who lost his ability to effectively throw a baseball to first base, possibly due to overthinking the mechanical specifications of the task.

movements, and it cannot do as good a job at that as the skill itself used to do.¹⁹

Here McDowell is explaining how mindedness becomes detached, but it is clear that he is suggesting that there is another psychological state in which a person can be mindful without becoming detached. As I understand practical mindedness, it does not involve the contemplation of rules for appropriate action, or of the necessary bodily movements that must be performed to successfully achieve a certain practical outcome. On McDowell's account, mindedness is alluded to as a faculty; one which takes account of experience and preserves the conceptual form of experiential content, so that it is possible for such content to have any bearing whatsoever on our perceptual experience of the world. Thus, for McDowell, it is not the case that practical activity is successful because the mind ceases to be operative, enabling the body to take control of our faculty for intentional response. Rather, for him, there is no distance between mind and world; they meet at the level of perceptual experience.

In response to Dreyfus' critique of his view of subjectivity, McDowell explains that what he means when he states this: "the knowledge experience yields to rational subjects is of a kind that is special to rational subjects" is that in the way an experience is disclosed to rational subjects, capacities of a kind that play a role in discursive activity are at work. He is not however, suggesting that the subject is always engaging in activity that is of a cognitive nature. When McDowell speaks of rational subjects having "knowledge" he is referring to the knowledge that things are as one perceives them to be; as experience discloses them to be, enabling one to perform skillfully when the composition of one's perceptual field coheres with the world in some way or another. This "knowledge" (which is in the form of experiential content) also serves as a conduit of sorts between discursive exercise and the world of which

¹⁹ McDowell, Response to Dreyfus; pp. 367,368.

it is concerned.²⁰ Thus, McDowell's view provides us with a coherent explanation of how we are able to perform skillfully at all, as well as how discursive exercise can be grounded in, or have any relation whatsoever to, the world that it is putatively detached from.

The claim that a kind of knowledge is available in the act of experiencing itself also figures in McDowell's response to Dreyfus' critique of his view of openness. McDowell agrees with Dreyfus that our embodied coping skills are necessarily connected to our capacity for perceptual openness to a network of interrelated affordances, but he can accept this and still hold that the perceptual openness that enables embodied-coping is permeated with rationality.²¹ McDowell argues that if we are to regard thinking and judging as having any bearing on the world as it exists independently of the mind, then the constraint on thinking and judging must be imposed by the world as an independent reality. McDowell however, avoids succumbing to the Myth of the Given in that he asserts that conceptual rationality extends all the way through to perceptual experience.

McDowell explains the concept of openness in Kantian terms: external constraint is addressed by regarding perceptual experience as an operation of the mind's "passive receptivity" to the interrelated affordances that make up the world.²² Opportunity for knowledge and the ability to make judgments that correlate to the world in some way are regarded as "spontaneity" in terms of what we are receptive to. For McDowell, it is because both receptivity and spontaneity are jointly involved in perceptual experience that we are able to take account of the way the world is, which enables us to act appropriately, so as to successfully perform in practical activity. I must reiterate however, that McDowell is not suggesting that we are always in a position to exercise our cognitive abilities; he only asserts

²⁰ The Myth of the Mind as Detached p. 42.

²¹ McDowell, What Myth? p. 344.

²² McDowell, Mind and World: pp. 41-44

that our experience will be in a form that is thinkable (i.e. a form that is conceptually organized).

That last point can be made clearer with an explanation of McDowell's distinction between intuitional content and discursive content. According to McDowell, both types of content are conceptual; the difference between discursive content and intuitional content is that the former is articulated, while the latter is not. For him, the categorical unity of intentional content is "given"; it is not a result of the mind making meaningful connections.²³ He asserts that even if exploiting the content given in an intuition does require one to acquire a new discursive capacity, one will have to "carve out" that content from the intuition's unarticulated content in order for it to be connected with other bits of content in discursive activity. Although intuitional content is not discursive—in the sense that it has not yet been articulated—it is conceptual, because every aspect of it is given in a form that makes it suitable to figure in discursive activity.²⁴

When McDowell speaks of openness to "facts" about the world, he is working from the assumption that the perceiver experiencing such openness is not mistaken in what she perceives (i.e. that what she perceives corresponds in some way to how the world actually is). That is, when a perceiver is not mistaken about her experience, what she is receptive to is perceptible facts that can be grasped in thought, and that are the content of acts of spontaneity. So, to conceive of affordances as facts about the world is just to say that the content of an unmissaken perceptual experience corresponds to the world in such a way that the perceiver is able to enjoy success in practical activity, and make judgments that are correct in the sense that they correspond to the content that the perceiver passively receives from the world. The

²³ McDowell, *Avoiding The Myth of The Given*; pp. 265-264.

²⁴ *Ibid*

implication of understanding openness in this way is that the perceiver's access to experiential content, which correlates to the world in some fashion, constitutes possessing a kind of knowledge.

We can get a better sense of why McDowell's view is invulnerable to Dreyfus' phenomenological critique by examining their back and forth exchange on mindedness in practical activity. McDowell frames things in terms of Dreyfus' example of a lightning chess player acting in a state of total absorption, or "flow". With that example, Dreyfus wants to show that someone such as a master blitz chess player, or an exemplar of acting virtuously (someone who must act quickly) does not have time to deliberate reasons for her actions, and cannot therefore, be acting for a reason.²⁵ Dreyfus' view is that such masters are able to act quickly and appropriately because their accumulated experience enables them to be drawn in by the relevant situational forces at play. McDowell argues that Dreyfus' insistence that the successful performance of skillful practical activity is incompatible with the notion of a perceiver being aware of the reasons for her actions is founded on the incorrect assumption that reason for action is only present when a perceiver has adopted a distanced, deliberative stance, and becomes detached from the state of total absorption.

McDowell argues that one is not inhibited from knowing what she is doing while exhibiting the sort of self-awareness that is indicative of agency. He acknowledges that if one were in some way compelled to contemplate reasons for her actions (e.g. if she were asked "What are you doing?") it would most likely cause detachment from absorbed-coping, but he is insistent that the absorbed coper has self-knowledge even if it is not explicitly expressed.²⁶ So, on this account, when one becomes detached from absorption and expresses a statement

²⁵ See McDowell *The Myth of the Mind As Detached*; pp.46-52.

²⁶ *Ibid* pp.47-52.

about some aspect of the world; she is expressing knowledge that she already possessed during absorbed-coping. In taking such a stance, McDowell is able to provide a coherent account of how we are able to express knowledge that corresponds to the world at all.'

The idea that mindedness is necessarily linked to detachment is also difficult to reconcile with a comprehensive account of acting for reasons. Confounding mindedness with detachment guides Dreyfus to the conclusion that one can only act for a reason if her action is the result of rational reflection on the particular situation from a distanced perspective. Thus, on Dreyfus' account, a master playing chess, or an exemplar of the virtue of kindness is drawn into action by the relevant forces involved, and based upon the appropriate motivations of the respective situations before them, but he is adamant that neither expert acts for a reason.²⁷ Here, I think Dreyfus is missing the point that when the chess master for example, is drawn into action by the forces on the board, her receptivity to the situation, and her ability to respond appropriately is an operation of what McDowell calls "cultivated rationality".²⁸ I will provide a more detailed explanation of this concept in the next section, but for now it should suffice to say that "cultivated rationality" is an experientially conditioned state of mind that enables one to perceive the solicitations of the world as reasons to act in a certain way.

Dreyfus considers absorbed-coping to be the motivational response of an expert trained in a multitude of appropriate responses to a network of manipulative forces, but he denies that such an expert coper can have reasons for her actions while still absorbed in coping.²⁹ This is problematic for a number of reasons; the most obvious one being that it is in want of an explanation of how such an expert is able to give reasons for her actions even if she has been questioned immediately after the action, and has not had time to deliberate.

²⁷Dreyfus, *The Myth of the Pervasiveness of the Mental*; p. 35.

²⁸ McDowell, *The Myth of the Mind as Detached*; p.47.

²⁹Dreyfus, *Overcoming The Myth Of The Mental*; pp. 56,57.

Again, McDowell and I do not suppose that the actions of the lightning chess player, or the kind person are the consequences of critical analysis issued from a distanced perspective; that would undoubtedly register as a detachment from the concrete situation. Rather, the claim is that such behavior must be the product of one's rationality at work in order for the content of one's experience to figure in any situation in which one is called upon to give reasons for her actions. That is to say that the reasons one gives for her actions will be conceptually structured in such a way that corresponds to her perceptual experience in the state of total absorption. If we can accept that the conceptual form of perceptual experience's content corresponds in such a way that it is transferable between the states of detachment and total absorption, then there is no reasonable ground to consider the former to be knowledge, but not the latter.

McDowell makes the point more precisely by illustrating what an agent must have knowledge of in order to give reasons for her actions if they are requested:

[S]elf-knowledge is present when agents are acting in flow no less than when action issues from a distanced rational relation to the situation. As with the "What?" question, if we compel an agent who is acting in flow to answer the "Why?" question, that will break the flow. But here again, that does not matter. What matters is that the agent can answer the "What?" question straight off, without any need for reflection or investigation.³⁰

What McDowell is getting at here is that although the coper has been severed from the flow experience by the request that she give explicit reasons for her actions, in order to accommodate such a request immediately, and without taking time for critical reflection, she must have known the reasons that she subsequently provides while she was still in a state of

³⁰ McDowell, *The Myth of the Mind As Detached*; p. 47.

flow. When she states her reasons explicitly, she is expressing an already held self-knowledge that is indicative of agency. Furthermore, if she explains her actions in terms of them being responses to solicitations—as Dreyfus would undoubtedly accept that she could—what she would be providing is a rational explanation of her actions.³¹ Dreyfus defends his position by arguing that the only response a master could give to a request of reasons for her actions would be something along the lines of “I acted as I did because, I was drawn to act that way”. He argues that in such a case the master has only given a reason in the trivial sense, because it is not open to criticism, nor has she given a justification for her actions. His point is that such “trivial” responses do not make any contribution towards adjusting the subject’s thinking to experience, rather, they demonstrate the limitations of rationality.³²

McDowell is able to address Dreyfus’ trivialization charge by reiterating his position that when the forces of the world solicit one to act, one’s response is her rationality in operation. That is, when a subject gives the answer that she acted as she did because she was drawn to act that way, she is giving expression to the practical knowledge that guided her responses in the first place. Moreover, McDowell argues that a master chess player for example, should be capable of offering a more specific response than something like “I made the move because I was drawn to make it”. That is, a master should be able to retroactively say why a certain move seemed better than others in a particular moment, even though such an articulation is not a necessary requirement for the possession of practical knowledge. Thus, it is not a trivialization of rationality to suggest that even the most mundane reasons one might give are expressions of the operation of rationality in practical action.³³

³¹ Ibid

³² The Myth Of The Pervasiveness Of The Mental; p.35.

³³ McDowell, The Myth of the Mind As Detached; pp. 45,46.

McDowell slightly tweaks the Kantian notion of the categorical unity of apperception in order to provide a clearer understanding of the way practical rationality can be conceptual without degrading performance. The point of framing the discussion in Kantian terms is to make it clear that the “world-disclosing” aspect of human experience, which is a characteristic of openness, indicates that the content of such an experience is unified in a way that Kant regarded as categorical. And, according to McDowell, Kant correlates the categorical unity that makes “world-disclosingness” possible, with the transcendental unity of apperception.³⁴ On McDowell’s account, self-awareness in action is characterized by an “I do”, not a Kantian “I think” added to representations of one’s actions. So, understanding action in terms of the “I do” is, on this account, a way to express the “essentially first-person character of the realization of practical rational capacities that acting is”.³⁵ McDowell’s point is that the kinds of concepts that are at play when one acts, are concepts of things to do. Thus, actualizing such a concept is doing the thing at hand, rather than thinking about doing it.

By conceiving of self-awareness in action as being characterized by an “I do” rather than an “I think”, McDowell has provided us with a way to view practical activity as rational in the sense that it is conceptually formulated in such a way that it can figure in discursive activity. McDowell thereby makes plausible the idea that rationality can be present in the skillful doing of practical activity—activity that is characteristic of absorbed-coping—without necessarily making representations of the “I do” explicit by pairing them with representations of the “I think”. This conception makes it easier for us to understand how it is that rational mindedness can be operative during our practical engagement with the world without resulting in the degradation of performance. Moreover, this conception makes sense of how

³⁴ McDowell, *What Myth?* p. 346.

³⁵ McDowell, *Response to Dreyfus*; p. 367.

our openness to the world has epistemological significance without it being susceptible to the Myth of the Given. It is in these ways that McDowell is able to meet the challenge put to him by Dreyfus' phenomenological critique.

3. The Conceptual Form of Practical Rationality

So far, I have been arguing that McDowell's view is not vulnerable to Dreyfus' phenomenological critique. I have suggested that McDowell is able to meet the challenge that Dreyfus' critique presents by distinguishing between two psychological states: one that is oriented towards discursive activity, and another that is oriented towards practical activity. I have argued that the distinction of these two psychological states is what makes sense of the putatively recognized phenomenon, namely the ability of adult human beings to be open to the solicitations of the world, and to preserve the content of their perceptual experiences in a form that is suited to figure in discursive activity. In this section I want to focus on the psychological state that is oriented towards practical activity. I will draw from some of McDowell's ethical works in an attempt to provide a better sense of how conceptual rationality can be unmediated by deliberation. I will also provide an explanation of McDowell's schema of how the practically oriented psychological state might be conceptually situated, so as to provide a more coherent picture of the relation between mind and world.

A good place to start is with McDowell's conception of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). McDowell takes his cue on this topic from Aristotle; he considers the practical intellect to be a virtue that is cultivated by habit. On McDowell's account, the practical rationality of one who has cultivated a disposition to act skillfully in the performance of a particular activity (a *phronimos*) is demonstrated by what she does, even in a case in which what she does is not

the result of deliberation.³⁶ That is, the *phronimos* has garnered an understanding of what it takes to perform a particular skill to the extent that she is disposed to do whatever may be necessary to perform the skill in question successfully; she just performs the skill immediately, without any need to deliberate. This goes to explain how rational mindedness can be operative in a way that makes skillful action possible, but which does not detach the coping individual from absorption. The idea here is that the *phronimos* has had enough experience with a particular activity that she has developed a kind of sensitivity to the attractive and repulsive forces of the world that draw on us to act in certain ways. So far, this conception is congenial to Dreyfus' view—which is influenced by Heidegger and Merleau Ponty—in that it gives depth to the idea of openness to the world, as well as how we are able to respond appropriately to the world's solicitations. McDowell's view is of course different in the sense that for him, practical activity—especially skillful action—is undertaken for reasons that are situation specific, and that are expressible in thought, even if they are not expressed explicitly.

McDowell points out that someone who is a master at a particular skill can be relied on to act appropriately in response to the situational requirements of her respective field of expertise. Furthermore, he argues that the reliability of the master's behavior is not a non-rational habit or instinct. For McDowell, the fact that a particular situation requires a certain kind of behavior is an indication that there are definitive reasons for one to act in a manner that is appropriate to the situational requirements of a given activity. He goes on to say that the master's reliable behavior suggests that she is aware of the relevant situational requirements and how to respond to them appropriately.³⁷ If what enables a master to act

³⁶ McDowell, *What Myth?* p. 341.

³⁷ McDowell, *Virtue and reason*; p. 51.

skillfully—as opposed to merely competently—is the possession of such an awareness, then it is incomprehensible that one would deny that the master’s reliably appropriate actions are performed for reasons that are specific to what the situation demands. Therefore, a reliable sensitivity (in the sense that it is frequently in accordance with what a particular situation requires) is just another way to describe a practical knowledge of what needs to be done, and how to do it.

McDowell describes the master’s sensitivity as a perceptual capacity that is afforded to those who have acquired the relevant experience. He is careful however, to remind us that such an expert does not need to be articulate enough to possess the relevant concepts associated with her respective skill; but even if she is articulate enough, the concepts do not necessarily play a role in her reasons for action, it is sufficient that she thinks of her actions as being appropriate to the situational requirements of a particular activity.³⁸ A master chess player for example, is presumably familiar with enough strategies and counter moves to have acquired the perceptual capacity to detect the situational requirements of a given chess match so as to respond appropriately, without the need for deliberation. So, the perceptual sensitivity of a master chess player is such that counter moves and strategies are not even considered before she acts: as she is solicited by the situational influences of the board, she immediately moves to accommodate them with the appropriate response.

The point McDowell wants to make is that the *phronimos* possesses a unique perceptual capacity that is both an exercise of conceptual rationality, and a bodily adeptness to the situational requirements of the practical activity at hand. He argues that it is highly implausible that we can get an understanding of the various ways in which skillful practical activity is rationally motivated, without accounting for the distinctive way the *phronimos*

³⁸ Ibid.

experiences situations. This view of the *phronimos*, and skillful practical activity in general, forms the basis of McDowell's larger argument that conceptual rationality can be involved in practical activity without degrading performance. On his account, the perceptual capacity of the *phronimos* is essentially a psychological state; one that enables her to be sensitive to certain aspects of the situation before her, as constituting reasons to act in a certain way. Another way to put this is to say that the *phronimos* is able to detect the situational requirements of a given activity as well as to successfully perform the actions that satisfy those requirements, resulting in a felicitous practical outcome. Thus, the *phronimos*' reliably felicitous responses to a specific set of situational requirements should neither be explained as mindless bodily responses to manipulative worldly forces, nor as the work of a distinct type of bodily perception that operates beyond the space of reasons.

The solicitations of the world show up as reasons to act in certain ways for the *phronimos* because, she has cultivated a dispositional awareness that enables her to recognize such responses as being appropriate to the situation at hand, and therefore, likely to result in success. So, it is not the case that the mind has to be completely excluded from practical engagement with the world in order to avoid the degradation of one's performance. Rather, we should say that the reliably successful behavior of the *phronimos* is the result of the mind working in a way that is rational, but not deliberative. That is, the practical intellect of the *phronimos* is such that her actions are undertaken for reasons corresponding to the solicitations that prompt them, but she does not weigh the reasons against their alternatives before acting. McDowell describes the perceptual capacity of the *phronimos* as working to

“silence” all reasons but one. In that way, when the *phronimos* is in the relevant psychological state, her actions are unmediated by deliberation.³⁹

I take McDowell to be asserting that the previously mentioned psychological state, which enables the *phronimos* to perceive a certain solicitation as a reason for acting that renders all others perceptibly silent, is essentially a practically oriented state of mind. It is born out of repeated experience with a particular activity, and can be described as a propensity to act for certain reasons, in such a way that the outcome is consistently felicitous. In other words, the *phronimos* is a master of her frequently engaged in activity precisely because her actions are motivated by reasons; ones that are normative in the sense that they correspond to the successful performance of a particular activity. So skillful practical activity is the work of a practically oriented intellect, one that is cultivated through experience. This explanation lends a high degree of plausibility to the idea that skillful activity can be rational without it resulting in the degradation of performance, because it suggests that conceptual rationality is what makes skillful action possible at all.

McDowell offers a schema for understanding the way a *phronimos* perceives the interrelated solicitations of the world as constituting reasons to act in certain ways, and as a conceptual framework by which her motivations for acting, and the specific situational requirements of the activity at hand can be made explicit so as to figure in discursive activity. The schema is meant to serve as an explanation of the *phronimos*' reliably successful practical action. We must however keep in mind that according to this account, the nature of the *phronimos* cannot be codified straightforwardly in a set of logically ordered principles of how one should act so as to achieve success in a particular practical activity. That is, we cannot get an understanding of the reliably successful performance of the *phronimos* without an

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 56,57.

appreciation of the distinctive way that she perceives the world. McDowell intends for the schema to be an analogy of the logical structure observed in discursive exercise, in the sense that if something can serve as an argument for an inferential conclusion, it can correspondingly figure in an explanation of someone's reasons for believing that conclusion. What we end up with is an application of Aristotle's notion of a practical syllogism, in which the premises of the argument express the content of a practically oriented psychological state.⁴⁰

McDowell's schema is an adaptation of David Wiggins' account of a practical syllogism in which the major premise gives the specifications of a determinate goal, (i.e. it is the representation of the possible successful performance of some practical activity) and the minor premise outlines certain actions that sufficiently accomplish the goal. The major premise in McDowell's schema represents "the content of an orectic psychological state: something we might conceive of as providing the motivating energy for the actions explained". If we keep in mind that the distinctive perceptual capabilities of the *phronimos* cannot actually be codified into universal principles of what determines success in practical activity, then we should be able to get a better sense of what McDowell's schema would look like by fitting it to Dreyfus' lightning chess master example.

In Dreyfus' chess master example, the master is "directly drawn by the forces on the board" to move skillfully, but he denies that the master moves for a reason. McDowell's schema is most certainly formulated with the situational influences of the chessboard (world) in mind, but so as to avoid succumbing to the myth of the Given, it is also an aim to account for the distinctive psychological states that make it possible for the master to perceive the

⁴⁰ Ibid. pp. 65-67

solicitations of the board as reasons to act in certain appropriate ways.⁴¹ In taking account of the situational influences of the chessboard, the schema should also reflect the idea that the players involved are included as situational aspects of a given chess match. Thus, the conceptual makeup of the schema will depend on the master's unique relation to situations on the board, (e.g. familiarity with appropriate counter moves and strategies etc.) and therefore, can only be presented broadly.

So, the major premise of our practical syllogism would be something like the desire to win a particular chess match, or in a more detailed description, the successful execution of a certain strategy. The minor premise would correspond to whichever moves and strategies are available as a means to satisfy the orectic ambition of the master (i.e. winning the chess match). This means that the content of the major premise would express the overall orectic psychological state of the master when she is focused on winning the match. Whereas the content of the minor premise would provide details of the circumstantial feasibility of accomplishing the goal outlined in the major premise (e.g. having the right pieces to initiate a certain strategy). The individual concepts outlined by the minor premise would correspond to the moves that are perceptually salient to the master as being conducive to accomplishing the goal of winning the match.

The point of suggesting McDowell's schema is to provide a sense of how the conceptual content of the *prhonomos*' unique psychological state would have the same basic logical form as the syllogism in a discursive exercise. Just as the minor premise of an inferential syllogism serves as a bridge of sorts between the major premise and a relevant conclusion, the perceptually salient aspects of the *prhonomos*' practical experience are the means by which the content of an orectic psychological state comes to fruition. The schema

⁴¹ As quoted by McDowell in *The Myth of the Mind As Detached*; p.46

cannot take us much farther than that. A more detailed description of the conceptual content of the *phronimos*' unique psychological state cannot be illustrated, it can only be perceived from the perspective of the *phronimos*. However, since the schema serves only to give a general description of how the experiential content of the *phronimos*' would have to be structured so as to figure in discursive activity, it takes us right where we wanted to go.

Although we cannot get an exact picture of the *phronimos*' psychological state, McDowell has given us a clue as to how it would be conceptually situated: he tells us that the content of a practical psychological state will necessarily have the same form as when it is the content of a discursive exercise. This mirrors the phenomenon in that the content of a discursive exercise is putatively regarded as being conceptually situated according to the corresponding perceptual experience from which it originates. Thus, the notion that the *phronimos* enjoys a unique psychological state that enables her to perceive the solicitations of the world as constituting reasons to act in certain ways without degrading her performance, makes plausible the idea that conceptual rationality is operative at the level of perceptual experience. And, the idea that the content of such a perceptual experience has a form that is logically compatible with the content of a discursive exercise makes sense of the putatively recognized relation between mind and world.

A proponent of Dreyfus' view might ask something along these lines: why should it make more sense to approach the problem from the perspective that skillful activity is the work of the practical intellect, rather than to approach it from the perspective that the body has its own kind of motor intentional response mechanism, which is drawn into operation by the attractive and repulsive forces of the world? To this question I give two answers concerning the coherence of Dreyfus' account. First, there is good reason to doubt the

assertion that conceptual rationality is necessarily incompatible with skillful action.

Therefore, a more coherent account of skillful activity, and the relation between mind and world is to explain how conceptual rationality can be operative without inhibiting the body from satisfying the mechanical requirements of the activity at hand. This view is more coherent because, the phenomenon (especially of activity that is putatively regarded as intellectual, e.g. chess play, or acting virtuously) suggests that the mind is always operative—In some capacity—during the performance of skillful activity. Second, the idea that the body is capable of intentional action, which is non-rational and non-conceptual is incoherent because, it implies that (in terms of the relation between mind and world) the body is able to preserve the content of experience in a form that is compatible with conceptually arranged content of discursive exercise. It is difficult to understand how the body could accomplish such a task without it being, in some way, able to operate within a conceptual framework. I will say more about the coherency of the two views in the conclusion of this paper.

Conclusion

My argument in this paper can be summarized as follows: McDowell's account of the mind-world relation is invulnerable to Dreyfus' phenomenological critique, which I have identified as Dreyfus strongest criticism of McDowell's view. In support of this claim, I argued that McDowell makes sense of the putatively accepted phenomena by distinguishing between two psychological states, each of which is oriented towards its own particular mode of expressing conceptual rationality. I then ventured to boost the plausibility of that assertion by way of outlining McDowell's schema of how the conceptual form of practical activity could be preserved—so as to figure in discursive activity—In such a way that it corresponds to the world in some real fashion.

In conclusion, I want to discuss the argument put forth in this paper in terms of its coherency. That is, I want to evaluate the coherency of McDowell's view—as I have construed it here—in comparison to that of Dreyfus. In evaluating the two views based on their respective coherency, or to put it another way, based on their respective ability to explain the putative phenomenon comprehensively, it should be helpful to remind the reader of what the debate between McDowell and Dreyfus is ultimately about. The Debate is centered on explaining how it is possible for experiential content to play a justificatory role in the formation of beliefs and judgments in such a way that makes sense of the phenomenon associated with the mind-world relation. With that expectation of what a theory of the mind-world relation should accomplish, it seems quite obvious to me that McDowell's view is more promising in that regard than is Dreyfus' view.

I take the view put forth in this paper to be a more coherent account of the mind-world relation because, it has the potential to explain all the relevant aspects of the phenomenon—not just the aspects associated with absorbed, skillful activity. Dreyfus' critique of McDowell's view is a phenomenological one, but he (Dreyfus) doesn't get to the phenomenon that was of initial interest, namely, the phenomenon of experiential content playing a justificatory role in discursive activity; he only offers an account of “non-conceptual” absorbed-coping in relation to the attractive and repulsive forces of the world. When Dreyfus insisted that the focus of inquiry should be on how it is that non-conceptual content is converted into conceptual content, he set up a problem to which he offered no approach to solving. In doing so, Dreyfus has undoubtedly made the phenomenon of mind relating to world even more perplexing than it initially was.

McDowell's view—especially as I have argued that it should be construed—makes sense of the justificatory role of experiential content in that it regards such content as conceptual from the start. His view is essentially this: making sense of the mind-world relation requires us to understand perceptual experience as the mind meeting up with the world. On this account, it makes sense for the content of discursive activity to correspond to experiential content, because they have the same conceptual form. The schema that is outlined in this paper is intended to provide a broad sense as to how experiential content would have to be logically structured so as to figure in discursive activity.

By distinguishing between the two psychological states discussed above, McDowell's view has the potential to make sense of the phenomena of embodied coping. This is because it considers the "flow" experience of total absorption to be made possible by one's capacity to engage in a practically oriented psychological state. The phenomenon of a practically engaged individual becoming detached from the concrete situation at hand, and experiencing the degradation of her performance can then be explained by her inability to access the relevant psychological state. McDowell' has thus provided explanations of all the relevant aspects of the phenomenon associated with the mind-world relation, rather than only addressing the phenomenon of absorbed-coping, and leaving the initial inquiry for a later discussion. For that reason, it should be clear that McDowell's view provides a more coherent account of the relation of mind and world than does Dreyfus' view.

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