

Self in Action

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‘We find ourselves always already engaging with the world...’ – John McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lecture II¹

I. Overture

McDowell opens his lecture ‘Intention in Action’ with the following remarks:

Ultimately I would like to recommend a conception of intentional bodily action according to which the movements of limbs that it involves are themselves cases of conceptual capacities in operation – not, as the most obvious alternative would have it, *results* of separate episodes or states in which conceptual capacities are in play. An idea on these lines is attractive for at least two related reasons. First, it definitely avoids a problematic interiorization of exercises of conceptual capacities; the relevant exercises of conceptual capacities are themselves constituted by overt bodily movements. Second, it definitely avoids a problematic distancing of the true self – the seat of reason, including the practical reason that is operative in practical thinking – from the embodied form of human individual. (McDowell unpublished, p.1)²

He then provides detailed analyses of the notion of ‘intention in action.’ Rather than getting involved in this, I attempt to approach the relevant issues with a different angle, as my title alludes. Specifically, I would like to develop McDowell’s second reason in the above quotation, that self is manifest in actions.

I will proceed with three stages. First I will help my audiences understand this particular aspect of McDowell’s philosophy by relating the present discussion to his view about perception, for it is the most notable part of his thoughts so far. My focus will be the relation between his conception of perception and his objections to the

¹ The present paper evolves from ‘Towards a Conceptualist Account of Action,’ my term paper of ‘McDowell and Merleau-Ponty,’ a seminar led by Professor Hubert Dreyfus and Hannah Ginsborg in UC Berkeley, fall 2006. I am indebted to both of them very much. I also gained various helpful comments from Professor Alva Noë, who also presented in the seminar. Professor Dreyfus, my main opponent in that paper, casts doubt on the notion of ‘we’ in my opening quotation here: ‘who is the ‘we’ for McDowell? A subject? A Kantian ‘I think’?’ This query reminds me about the relation between action and self. At that time I couldn’t come up with a satisfying response to Professor Dreyfus; the present paper is supposed to be a further and fuller answer to his challenge.

² McDowell informs me that he is not going to publish this piece.

‘Cartesian inner space’ model, for this brings us to see the relation between perception and self.³ Then I will consider some reactions from Hubert Dreyfus, who sees his own position as Merleau-Pontyan. And finally, I will fill in more details of my McDowellian conception of action and self by meeting Dreyfus’ challenges.

II. McDowell’s Self I: Against the Myth of the Subjective

McDowell’s central claim about perception is that conceptual capacities are inextricably involved in perceptual experience. To give the claim more substance, we can rephrase it by saying that it is Kantian spontaneity, i.e. conceptual capacities, that are responsible for both intentionality and justification, two important aspects concerning perception and its relations to beliefs. For my purpose, I will bypass the conceptuality debate and turn to his discussion of the Cartesian inner space model. He characterizes the model like this:

In a fully Cartesian picture, the inner life takes place in an autonomous realm, transparent to the introspective awareness of its subject; the access of subjectivity to the rest of the world becomes correspondingly problematic, in a way that has familiar manifestation in the mainstream of post-Cartesian epistemology...[the inner space is] a locus of configurations that are self-standing, not beholden to external conditions...(McDowell 1986, p.236-7)

On this picture, there is certain distance, metaphorical speaking, between self and its mental episodes. Here is not the place to go into the details of it; all we need to bear in mind is that McDowell ends up with a picture that repudiates the inner space, the remote distance, constituted by the solitary self and mental episodes considered as dead signposts.⁴ Perceptual experiences, or mental episodes in general, are not veils between us and the external world.

McDowell’s discussion of the Cartesian inner space is reminiscent of Donald Davidson’s recantation of what he dubs ‘the Myth of the Subjective’:

[T]he idea that there is a basic division between uninterpreted experience and an organizing conceptual scheme is a deep mistake, born of the essentially incoherent picture of the mind as a passive but critical spectator of an inner show...I have argued against the postulation of ‘objects of thought,’ whether these are conceived on the model of sense data, or as propositional in character. There are many states of mind, but their description does not require that there be ghostly entities that the

³ For a fuller discussion of this, please see my ‘Scheme-Content Dualism, Experience, and Self.’

⁴ Especially see his ‘Wittgenstein on Following a Rule’ and ‘Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space.’

mind contemplates. (Davidson 2003, p.52)

Although with different terms, what they have in minds are basically the same. We shouldn't think of the relation between self and its mental episodes as an inner eye directing to some immediate given. Now, since the present paper is an extension of McDowell's philosophy, I will discuss the crucial reason why this picture is unacceptable for McDowell (as opposed to reasons for Davidson).

McDowell situates the argument into the discussion of Saul Kripke's Wittgensteinian rule-following paradox. For our purpose, my summary of the debate will be relevantly independent of the paradox as such.⁵ The crux of the paradox is the 'infinite regress of interpretation' Kripke finds in *Philosophical Investigations* § 201. Kripke's skeptic asks us '[h]ow do I know that "68 + 57," as I *meant* "plus" in the *past*, should denote 125' (Kripke 1982, p.12)? The main point of this query is that we can always assign different interpretations to one's mental history and past behaviors, however deviant they might be, and there is no reason in principle to rule out those incompatible interpretations, as long as they can accommodate the mental history and past behaviors in question. McDowell's maneuver is to block the regress from the very beginning: if we regard mental episodes as meaningless signposts that in need of our interpretations, than meaning does evaporate in our picture. But that way of thinking is not compulsory; to preserve meaning in the picture, we had better not think of self and its mental episodes as constituting a Cartesian inner space. I will further discuss and develop McDowell's positive account in the final section. What's important at the present stage is to remember that for McDowell, self is not something concealed behind its mental episodes, for the reason I just sketched above, among many others.

Now, one would probably expect that conceptualism could be naturally extended to the case of action. Action, like perception, mediates mind and world as well, though with opposite directions. To phrase this in John Searle's term, they have different 'directions of fit' (Searle 1983). And this expectation is confirmed by McDowell's own remarks in Lecture V of *Mind and World*.⁶ He sketches his view on action by saying that 'intentions without overt activity are idle, and movements of limbs without concepts are mere happenings, not expressions of agency' (McDowell 1994, p.89). On the face of it, McDowell attempts to offer a parallel account for action, though he does not spell it out in those lectures. Perception reflects the world, action changes the world; perception justifies beliefs, action carries out intentions. To

⁵ I discuss this at length in 'The Skeptical Paradox and the Nature of Self.'

⁶ Professor Noë expresses his skepticism about this. He thinks after all, experience and action are quite different episodes. I agree that this expectation is not universal, but that doesn't affect my following discussions.

conceive a parallel story is not so unreasonable, at least at an intuitive level. Therefore, some philosophers start to envisage what McDowell would say, or should say, about action, Jonathan Dancy for example.⁷ Some other philosophers go even farther to criticize the envisaged McDowellian account of action; Hubert Dreyfus is one among them. The next section will be an evaluation of Dreyfus' challenges.⁸

III. Self, Action, and Skillful Coping

Dreyfus first launches his challenges in his 2005 APA Presidential Address named 'Overcoming the Myth of the Mental.' Later, McDowell and Dreyfus reply to each other under the following titles: 'What Myth?', 'Exorcising the Ghost of the Mental,' 'Response to Dreyfus,' and 'Response to McDowell.'⁹ In the later papers Dreyfus confesses that he misunderstood McDowell at some point in the first paper, but insists that McDowell's position is still problematic by phenomenologists' light. I shall argue that Dreyfus commits a false dichotomy from the very beginning, and continue to commit it even after he modifies his original position. Let me proceed according to the temporal order.

Dreyfus starts his argumentation by posing this question: '[c]an we accept McDowell's Sellarsian claim that perception is "all the way out," thereby denying the more basic perceptual capacities we seem to share with prelinguistic infants and higher animal' (Dreyfus 2005, p.1)? The positive statement of the position goes like this: 'in assuming that all intelligibility, even perception and skillful coping, *must be, at least implicitly, conceptual*...Sellars and McDowell join Kant in endorsing what we might call *the Myth of the Mental*' (Dreyfus 2005, p.7, italics arranged by me). He formulates the debate in terms of the conceptuality issue, but as I said at the beginning of the paper, that will not be my central concern here. That doesn't mean that I attempt to bypass Dreyfus' crucial contention. Rather, I will try to show that the real issue is the relation between self and action, which is analogous to the relation between self and mental episodes, as discussed above.

Let me call the dichotomy I am going to object 'detachment / absorption' distinction.¹⁰ It has many guises, as we shall see. The first expression of it is this:

⁷ See Dancy (2006) and McDowell's reply to it in the same anthology.

⁸ McDowell himself also pays much attention on the relevant issues recently. However, since his own view has not been wrought out, my present discussion will be independent of his own thoughts at large. The same goes for Dancy's and Dreyfus' papers.

⁹ I haven't got the official version of those papers, so I refer to electronic versions of them in the present draft. I will try to fix this as soon as possible.

¹⁰ Dreyfus has an unpublished paper named 'Detachment, Involvement, and Rationality,' so originally the distinction is between 'detachment' and 'involvement.' But later he modifies his position by replacing 'involvement' with 'absorption.' I think it will be more productive if I adopt his new version from the very beginning.

Only if we stand back from our *engaged* situation in the world and represent things from a *detached* theoretical perspective do we confront the frame problem. (Dreyfus 2005, p.3, my italics)

The frame problem is a problem for traditional AI, and we need not go into that. What I am going to do here is to quote different passages exemplifying the dichotomy I would like to question. I will start my critical discussions after those quotations.

The actual phenomenon [i.e. expertise] suggests that to become experts we must switch from *detached rule-following* to a more *involved and situation specific way of coping*...Such emotional involvement seems to be necessary to facilitate the switchover from *detached, analytical rule following* to an entirely different *engaged, holistic mode of experience*... (Dreyfus 2005, p.7-8, my italics)

[W]e are capable of coping concretely *without thinking* at all. Indeed, in their *direct dealing with* affordances, adults, infants, and animals respond alike. (ibid., p.12, italics arranged by me)

[T]he expert usually does not need to *calculate*. If he has had enough experience and stays *involved*, he will find himself responding in a masterful way before he has time to *think*. (ibid., p.15, my italics)

[W]hen he introduces the term ‘understanding,’ Heidegger explains that he means a kind of *know-how* [as opposed to *know that*]. (ibid., p.16, my italics)

Indeed, in our everyday coping, which he [Heidegger] calls ‘pressing into possibilities,’ we don’t deal with *general properties* like weight...Rather, when everything is going well and we are *absorbed* in our coping, the equipment we are using ‘withdraws.’¹¹ (Dreyfus 2007, p.1)

I should have argued that *subjectivity* (not detachment) is the lingering ghost of the mental; that the necessity of ‘practical self-awareness in action’ haunts McDowell’s account of involved activity. (ibid., p.3, Dreyfus’ italics)

If the ego is always implicitly *monitoring* its coping, *attending* to what one was

¹¹ The sentence I omit is about one of Dreyfus’ modifications of his own position. I skip it since I am not going to deal with that aspect of his position. This passage clearly exemplifies Heidegger’s distinction between ‘present at hand’ and ‘ready to hand’ (1962), but here is not the place to go into this.

doing wouldn't degrade one's performance. But in general *paying attention* to a solicitation as one responds to it leads to a regression from expertise to mere competence. If the expert copes is to remain in *flow* and perform at his best, he must respond *directly* to solicitations without awareness of his activity or of the objects doing the soliciting. (ibid., p.4, my italics)

I think the texts speak for themselves quite clearly. Notice that in the sixth quotation, Dreyfus invokes the notion of 'subjectivity' to replace 'detachment,' but this doesn't really change the spirit of the distinction; whatever the terms Dreyfus prefers, the contrast he wants to make is clear enough: on the one hand we have *conscious* monitoring; on the other we get *unconscious* absorption; 'Self' or 'subject' presents in the former, but absent in the latter. This is Dreyfus' ground for the claim that 'mindedness' is not pervasive: in cases of unconscious absorption, mind / self is completely absent. The body takes over, so to speak.¹²

I believe the dichotomy betrays Dreyfus' misunderstanding of McDowell's 'pervasiveness of mindedness' claim. To see this, let me introduce a distinction on my own: 'heededness' versus 'mindedness.' The former fits perfectly with Dreyfus' 'attentive monitoring,' and the latter is what McDowell really has in mind. Dreyfus is quite right to stress that experts does not pay attention to what they are doing when they are in flow, and attention will screw things up. But that doesn't follow that 'mind' is totally absent in expertise. What's absent is attentive monitoring, not the whole mind. For one thing, Dreyfus owes us an argument for the equation between attention and mental function as a whole; for another, the equation cannot accommodate the fact that there are significant differences between expert's spontaneous reactions and normal reflexive behaviors. Although experts don't consciously monitor their actions in flows, that doesn't mean that those actions are not *theirs*. But arguably normal reflexive behaviors are not *ours*: not only we cannot control them, but also they can be completely explained without mentioning one's agency. In the case of expertise, though it's fair to say that experts are not monitoring those actions, still those actions are different from reflexive behaviors; the former is *unconscious intentional actions*, the latter is not. To say they are intentional is not to say that there is any conscious intention accompanying the actions, to be sure. All I want to stress is that expertise is different from reflexive behaviors in an important sense: vegetables are capable of doing the latter but not the former. Dreyfus' dichotomy cannot do justice to this.

A minor dispute between McDowell and Dreyfus that I didn't deal with concerns interpretations of Aristotle and Heidegger, but the basic issue is the same, as

¹² John Searle often uses this way of characterization in lectures and conversations.

McDowell says:

Dreyfus's idea that my reading [of Aristotle] conflicts with Heidegger's reflects his interpreting my talk of responsiveness to reasons in terms of an assumption I dispute: the assumption that to involve reason in action could only be to apply to the situation in which one acts some content fully specifiable in detachment from the situation. (McDowell 2007, p.3)

In the Presidential Address, Dreyfus mentions Merleau-Ponty's intellectualist: 'judgment is everywhere' (p.7), and he goes on to say that '[f]or McDowell, *mind* is everywhere...' (his italics). If we understand the pervasiveness of mindedness in terms of 'judgment,' McDowell's claim is indeed absurd. But McDowell is the one who insists that there can be something conceptual but *not judgmental*, as opposed to Davidson and Brandom. To gloss McDowell's mindedness with judgment or attention is wrong as an interpretation anyway.

Dreyfus also quotes Sartre:

When I run after a streetcar, when I look at the time, when I am absorbed in contemplating a portrait, there is no *I*...I am then plunged into the world of attractive and repellant qualities – but *me*, I have disappeared. (Sartre 1957, p.48-9)

But this does not support Dreyfus's claim. All this shows is that in doing these kinds of things, we are often not monitoring them. It doesn't follow, however, that our minds are gone. Those actions are simply different from reflexive behaviors that even vegetables are capable of.

Dreyfus complains that 'I still don't see an argument for the move from the reasonable claim that attentive experience with its attendant ego is *sometimes exercised* to the claim that this capacity is *always operative*' (Dreyfus 2007, p.6). I hope my discussions above can close the gap Dreyfus is pointing at. If that capacity were *not* always operative, the differences between expertise and low-level reflexive behaviors evaporate. Henceforth the *reductio* I propose.

I didn't answer all the challenges Dreyfus raises against McDowell, but I think it's enough to recognize where goes wrong with the dichotomy, for it lies at the heart of his objections. In next section I will connect the objection to the dichotomy to McDowell's further reply.

IV. McDowell's Self II: Against the Myth of the Disembodied Intellect

In reply to Dreyfus, McDowell introduces the notion of 'the Myth of the Disembodied

Intellect.’ He first quotes Merleau-Ponty:

In perception we do not think the object and we do not think ourselves thinking it, we are given over to the object and we merge into this body which is better informed than we are about the world, and about the motives we have and the means at our disposal. (Merleau-Ponty, p.56-7)

And he comments on this:

Now I think talking of oneself as merging into something one could refer to as *this body* is one of those rhetorical gestures that serve to conceal a lapse into the Myth of the Disembodied Intellect. Once I have separated *me* – the thinking thing I am – from *this body*, it is too late to try to fix things by talking about the former merging into the latter...The fact is that there is nothing for me to mean by ‘I,’ even though what I mean by ‘I’ is correctly specified as *the thinking thing I am*, except the very thing I would be referring to (a bit strangely) if I said ‘this body’ – at least if I said it in the sort of context in which Merleau-Ponty says it, with the thing in question said to be, for instance, informed about the world...If I give ‘this body’ the reference it must have in Merleau-Ponty’s context, it is wrong to say I merge into that; I simply *am* that. (McDowell 2007, p.17, his italics)

How should we understand this? I think McDowell’s remarks here sit well with the rejection of the dichotomy: if we take ‘detachment’ (or ‘subjectivity’) and ‘absorption’ as exhausting the conceptual space, then ‘self’ will be put on the left-hand side, and the consequence of this is just what Merleau-Ponty says: I need to ‘merge into this body’ when I go into flow or absorption. Hence the Myth. But the dichotomy collapses when we notice the difference between headedness and mindedness. The latter notion can do justice to the distinction between unconscious, spontaneous expertise and low-level reflexive behaviors. It is much weaker than headedness, or ‘detachment’ in Dreyfus’ word.

To make things more obvious, consider conceptualism in its original form. It was a conception about *perceptual experience*, and it would be indeed absurd to insist that in perception we are always *monitoring* our own experiences; we are always ‘detached’ from those experiences. If that was the claim, it has no initial plausibility at all. So much the worse for *Mind and World*, if that were the case.

Actually McDowell noticed the importance of ‘body’ about two decades ago. In the fifth lecture of *Mind and World*, he criticizes the Kantian formal self. Basically, Kant talks about the self and other related notions in Transcendental Deduction and

Paralogisms in *Critique of Pure Reason*. To paint with broad strokes, the main thought is that the self must be able ‘to accompany all my representations’ (B131); the self is only *formal* (A363). McDowell is not satisfied with this:

If something starts out conceiving itself as a merely formal referent for ‘I’ (which is already a peculiar notion), how could it come to appropriate a body, so that it might identify itself with a particular living thing? Perhaps we can pretend to make sense of the idea that such a subject might register a special role played by a particular body in determining the course of its experience. But that would not provide for it to conceive itself, the subject of its experience, as a bodily element in objective reality – as *a bodily presence* in the world. (McDowell 1994, p.102-3, my italics)¹³

Phenomenologists emphasize a lot on the notion of ‘body,’ but in supposing that ‘I’ equals ‘attentive awareness’ or a ‘monitoring self,’ they fall into the Myth of the Disembodied Intellect unwittingly.

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¹³ Some have argued that ‘body’ is an important element in Kant. ‘[T]he “normal” indexical duality of formal conditions and singular, *bodily* reference may belong to the very core of Kant’s theory of self’ (Wyller 2000, 87, my italics). Also see *Body and Practice in Kant*, by Helge Svarre (2006). For other relevant criticisms to McDowell, see Maximilian de Gaynesford’s ‘Kant and Strawson on the First Person’ (2003), and ‘McDowell’s Kant: Mind and World,’ Graham Bird (1996). I do not defend McDowell’s interpretation of Kant here. What I would like to stress is that McDowell is always clear about the Myth he introduces in response to Dreyfus.

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