

Rationality and Engagement: McDowell, Dreyfus and Zidane

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1. The project of rehabilitating the idea of the rational animal

The classical idea that human beings are marked off from the rest of the animal kingdom by their rationality, that powers of rationality in a suitably specified sense distinguish humans from the rest of nature, continues to exert a powerful hold over philosophers. Indeed, it is widely thought that much of the most significant progress made by philosophy in recent years has been to determine in a more specific way than was available before the sense in which rationality is the human-making feature. This, at any rate, is one of the claims that has been made on behalf of recent research on German Idealism (or research inspired by the Idealist tradition). By looking more closely at what Kant and Hegel said, interpreted in light of the insights provided by the likes of Frege, Wittgenstein and the American pragmatists, we are now said to be able to specify more precisely the sense in which human beings are rational animals and distinct from other animals on that account. Thanks to these historically informed philosophical inquiries, we are now in a better position to *redeem* the classical idea that human beings are distinctive on account of their rationality, so the claim goes.¹

An important part of determining the right conception of the human being as the rational animal is to correct prevailing misconceptions of this idea. And philosophers who want to rehabilitate the idea of the rational animal are well aware that imposters and false friends abound. The terms ‘rationalist’, ‘rationalistic’, ‘ratio-centric’ and ‘intellectualist’ are typically used pejoratively, as if they labelled some ago-old philosophical conceit or atavistic metaphysical illusion. So if the project of rehabilitating the idea of the rational animal is to

sound convincing, it must from the outset distinguish the notion of rationality it embraces from the problematic ‘rationalistic’, ‘intellectualist’ or ‘metaphysical’ conceptions.

Hence Robert Brandom, whose attempt at rehabilitating the notion of the rational animal is one of the more striking features of the contemporary philosophical scene, describes his project as an attempt at retrieving what he calls a ‘progressive rationalism’.² Progressive rationalism is distinguished from orthodox rationalism in doing without the ‘intellectualist’ distortions of what Brandom calls Cartesianism and Platonism. It was the great achievement of German Idealism, Brandom argues, to have established the basic shape of such a non-intellectualist, progressive rationalism. On the progressive rationalist view as Brandom commends it, human beings are like other animals in having sentience, which is to say awareness of an environment and biological needs that press for satisfaction. But unlike the non-rational animals, human beings also have sapience, which is to say cognizance of a world and self-awareness. The key feature that makes sapience possible, in this progressive rationalist account, is not possession of some metaphysically grounded power of mental representation, but concept-use. Human beings have sapience insofar as they are ‘concept-mongerers’, as Brandom puts it. Concept-mongering, or the application of concepts, is a normative activity, and the capacity to be bound by norms, which is what we owe our sapience to, is also the source of freedom. Human freedom, the freedom of the rational animal, consists not just in doing what one wants, as merely sentient creatures can do, but in taking responsibility for the norms one binds oneself to and the commitments one makes. This Kantian thought, together with the Hegelian one that rational responsibility is a social status, granted in communities of mutually recognizing agents, enables us to keep hold of the core rationalist truth that human beings are marked off by their rationality, without positing

some anti-naturalist or super-naturalist basis of that rationality (in the manner of the old intellectualist Cartesian/Platonist rationalism).

Another philosopher committed to the project of rehabilitating the idea of the rational animal in a non-rationalistic, non-intellectualist manner, and whose proposal has been hardly less influential than Brandom's, is John McDowell. And in his recent work, McDowell has ascribed what we might call the 'progressive' character of his rationalism (though this is Brandom's term, not McDowell's) to the 'engaged' quality of the concept of rationality he embraces.³ In other words, it is (in large part) because McDowell's conception of rationality has been determined in a way that keeps its engaged character in view, that it avoids the central flaws that have afflicted other 'rationalistic' conceptions. The project of rehabilitating the idea of the rational animal thus turns, according to McDowell, on it managing to hold onto the engaged nature of rationality, and this is just what McDowell's own conception (according to McDowell) is able to do.

In the Preface to *The Engaged Intellect*, McDowell states explicitly that if the notion of the human being as the rational animal is to be redeemed, then it is vital to resist, as he puts it,

'a rationalistic conception of the intellect, in this sense: a conception that disengages reason, which is special to rational animals, from aspects that they share with other animals. The engaged intellect, on this interpretation, is the intellect conceived as integrally bound up with the animal nature of the rational animal. In the case of the practical intellect, the disengagement to be opposed is a disengagement from motivational propensities associated with feelings, and also from animal capacities for physical intervention in the world. Resisting this disengagement ensures that we do not fall into philosophical difficulties that reflect a distancing of the intentional agent

from its bodily nature. In the case of the theoretical intellect, the disengagement to be opposed is a disengagement from what figures in Kant as sensibility, sensory responsiveness to features of the environment. Resisting this disengagement ensures that we are not vulnerable to familiar supposed problems about the possibility of empirical knowledge'.⁴

These two features of the engaged intellect, the features that enable us to conceive of human beings as rational animals without 'intellectualizing' them or submitting them to 'rationalistic' distortion, also serve as the basis of a two-fold conception of reason itself: a conception of practical reason as knowledge of how to respond appropriately to the full demands of a situation, including demands that are made manifest through one's feelings or one's attunement to the possibilities for effective bodily action; and a conception of theoretical reason as incarnated in the form that empirical knowledge takes for us on account of conceptual capacities that permeate human perception. If the rationality of the rational animal is conceived in this way, McDowell seems to be urging, sceptical questions about the possibility of morality ('why act for moral reasons?') or of objective knowledge ('how do I know that thoughts have objects?'), will no longer need answering. And it is mainly in the context of answering such questions that the rationalistic picture of the 'disengaged intellect' finds its appeal. Liberated from that context, McDowell suggests, the classical idea of the rational animal can be properly rehabilitated.

Of the essays by McDowell collected in *The Engaged Intellect*, the ones that bear most directly on the purposes outlined in the Preface – namely, the task of rehabilitating the notion of the rational animal by way of bringing out the engaged character of human rationality -- are the two that respond to Hubert Dreyfus's critical reading of his previously elaborated position.⁵ In his exchange with Dreyfus, the meaning and force of McDowell's

attempt at rehabilitating the idea of the rational animal is especially vivid.⁶ This is in part because, unlike some of McDowell's other critics (though not all), Dreyfus is explicit in his *rejection* of the notion of the rational animal, and Dreyfus's commitment to this stance, countered by McDowell's attempt at salvaging the classical idea, gives shape to the whole exchange.⁷ So one way of measuring the success of McDowell's attempt at rehabilitating the idea of the rational animal is to consider how well it fares in the wake of Dreyfus's criticisms. Does McDowell's understanding of the engaged character of rationality save the conception of the human being as the rational animal from the charge of intellectualism? Does the concept of engagement make rationalism sufficiently 'progressive', in the spirit evoked by Brandom? How far along the road to rehabilitation does McDowell's notion of the engaged intellect take the idea of the rational animal? By reflecting on the McDowell-Dreyfus debate we can hope to make some headway with these questions.

I shall proceed as follows. First (section 2), I will briefly outline the conception of rationality which, in McDowell's view, enables the idea of the rational animal to shake off its intellectualist appearance. McDowell shares Brandom's view that concept use, or some deep-seated 'conceptuality' of human existence, provides the key to rationality in the progressive non-intellectualist sense, though McDowell has his own account of what this conceptuality consists in, one that turns on the idea of it being a natural capacity. McDowell's responses to Dreyfus's initial objections fill out this account in a way that supports its claim to offer an alternative to radically disengaged models of rationality. But as I go onto consider in the following two sections (sections 3 and 4), Dreyfus points to two phenomena which he claims not only do not fit the conceptualist model but which suggest the need for an alternative to the whole idea of the human being as the rational animal. These are the phenomena of everyday coping, which according to Dreyfus is characterised by non-conceptual

‘involvement’, and expertise, which Dreyfus characterises in terms of non-conceptual ‘absorption’. In order to help determine the force of Dreyfus’s phenomenological objections, I bring a third character into the discussion: the eminent footballer, and subject of absorptive portrait, Zinédine Zidane (section 5). Drawing on Michael Fried’s reflections on the representation of absorption in Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno’s film *Zidane*, and invoking other considerations concerning the ‘mindedness’ of skilful activity, I question the sharp contrast between conceptuality and rationality on the one side and absorption and skilled coping on the other that frames Dreyfus’s position in the debate. I conclude with the suggestion that in order to see why Dreyfus is so firmly committed to that contrast, we need to widen the lens so that a broader range of philosophical motivations comes into view. For it is not just that there are *phenomena* that go missing or are mis-described in McDowell’s account, according to Dreyfus -- there are *ideals* and *excellences* that go missing too. In other words, the disagreement expressed between McDowell and Dreyfus about what human beings *are* (whether they are rational animals or not) is driven by deeper disagreement about what human beings *should* be (whether human beings are rational animals *at their best*).

2. Rationality as conceptual capacity

McDowell characterizes the general notion of rationality that, in his view, provides the basis of a non-intellectualist conception of the human being as the rational animal, as ‘responsiveness to reasons *as such*’.⁸ Responsiveness to reasons ‘as such’, as distinct from responsiveness to reasons *simpliciter*, involves the capacity to ‘step back’ and to seek to understand the reasons one is, or ought to be, responsive to.⁹ This capacity to stand back, to question, to ask for reasons, to seek to understand, and to make a judgement regarding the appropriate response to a situation, provides the general form of the conceptual capacity that, in McDowell’s view, distinguishes rational animals from non-rational animals. Whereas non-

rational animals are perfectly capable of responding to reasons – such as a bird shows when flying off to avoid danger – only rational animals can respond to reasons on account of grasping or understanding them ‘for the reasons that they are’, which is to say on account of their capacity to conceptualise.

Now McDowell concedes that if conceptual capacities in the stipulated sense - namely the capacity to ask for and give reasons, to seek to understand, to make a judgement – were only manifest in *the act* of stepping back, reflecting on and formulating reasons, reaching a judgement, and so forth, this would indeed be an unacceptably intellectualist picture of the human being, since it would either ignore or distort pervasive features of human life that do not show conceptuality in that sense. In perceiving things, in doing the right thing without thinking about or deliberating over it, and in unreflective everyday coping, human beings do not actively step back and exercise conceptual capacities, as an intellectualist might falsely suppose. But it is a distinctive feature of human perception, of moral actions that only human beings are capable of, and of human practical intelligence more generally, McDowell insists, that they are *shaped* by conceptual capacities, even if those capacities are not in these instances actively exercised. If it can be shown that the capacity to be responsive to reasons ‘as such’ is ‘operative’ without being active, as McDowell puts it, in human perception, moral excellence, and practical coping intelligence more generally, then conceptual capacity could plausibly be claimed to permeate the human life form without subjecting that life form to intellectualist distortion.

In the case of perception, the key thought behind the idea that conceptual capacities are operative within it is that without such an operation perceptions would not present the subject with ‘objects’ and would not entitle the subject to perceptual or empirical beliefs. The operation of conceptual capacities in perception can thus be invoked as a way of securing the

intelligibility of thoughts having objects, or the mind bearing on the world. This is the basic strategy McDowell deployed in *Mind and World*. McDowell argued there that the intelligibility of the mind bearing on the world, or in other words the possibility of objective, world-disclosive experience, was threatened on two fronts: what Wilfrid Sellars called the Myth of the Given -- the idea that non-conceptual sensory impacts ground empirical thought -- and Donald Davidson's supposed coherentism -- which denies that thought is grounded by experience at all. These threats could be avoided, McDowell argued, if we were to think of conceptual capacities as lending form to the inputs or 'deliverances' of sensation itself, that is to say, as bound up with human sensibility. McDowell explains elsewhere that human sensibility, or sensibility that is bound up with conceptual capacities, has a distinctive form in that it *offers* something to the subject that can be accepted or refused: namely, the content of a perceptual belief.¹⁰ In *Mind and World*, McDowell was concerned above all to show how acknowledgement of the existence of this capacity -- what Kant called 'spontaneity' -- did not commit us to an intellectualist metaphysical extravagance or anything metaphysically 'spooky'. His proposal was to envisage it as a natural phenomenon, not in the sense of an occurrence in 'the realm of law' familiar from the modern natural sciences, but in the sense of emerging naturally -- as a 'second nature', in Aristotle's sense -- in the process of human maturation.¹¹

McDowell draws more directly on Aristotle for his model of how conceptual capacities are operative in moral excellence, that is, in the ability to act in ways that display moral intelligence or insight.¹² This is the ability that Aristotle ascribes to the person with 'practical wisdom' (*phronimos*). According to McDowell's (to my mind uncontroversial) reading of Aristotle, practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is the ability to respond to the full demands of a particular situation. This ability is bound up with the ability to see what the full demands

of the particular situation are and to respond to those demands in the appropriate way. In many cases the *phronimos* will respond to those demands, and will reveal in her action what those demands are, without having to deliberate over them. The person with practical wisdom, in McDowell's Aristotelian conception, reveals her practical intelligence by responding to the reasons as they present themselves concretely in that particular situation, without necessarily subjecting those reasons to reflective assessment. As McDowell himself puts it, 'the practical rationality of the *phronimos* is displayed in what he does even if he does not decide to do that as a result of reasoning'.¹³ In such cases conceptual capacities are thus operative, if not actively exercised, in the *phronimos* seeing what should be done and responding immediately, without deliberation, to the reasons the situation presents by way of the appropriate action. And even in cases where deliberation *is* called for, the reasoning of the *phronimos* does not proceed by way of applying some general formula that can be specified independently of the demands of the particular situation, such as utility maximization or maxim universalization, but rather by way of a deeper interpretation, or fuller understanding, of the singular meaning of the situation itself. For McDowell, this shows that neither the non-deliberative nor deliberative display of practical wisdom, properly understood, is objectionably 'intellectualist', even though conceptual capacities are operative in them.

In his response to Dreyfus, McDowell proposes that unreflective coping activity, and practical skill in non-moral matters, should also be understood as bearing the stamp of conceptuality, as bringing conceptual capacities into play, and that we can arrive at such an understanding without succumbing to intellectualist illusions. Now McDowell concedes to Dreyfus that if rationality, understood as conceptual capacity, is notionally separated from human sensibility in the sphere of its theoretical application, and from responsiveness to the full demands of concrete situations in the sphere of its practical application, then it would

indeed appear excessively intellectualist to propose that everyday unreflective coping and expertise are ‘permeated’ by rationality. McDowell’s argument is that once conceptual capacities are integrated with sensibility, on the one hand, and with responsiveness to the full demands of a concrete situation, on the other, the objectionably intellectualist appearance of the idea that unreflective coping and expertise are permeated by rationality disappears. The availability of this ‘engaged’ model of rationality, McDowell contends, makes it unproblematic to conceive of involved unreflective coping and expertise as features of the distinctive life form of the rational animal.

3. Everyday coping and involvement

With the outlines of McDowell’s picture of rationality as conceptual capacity before us, let us now look in more detail at Dreyfus’s critique of McDowell, and in particular his repudiation of McDowell’s attempt at rehabilitating the classical notion of the human being as the rational animal. At the root of Dreyfus’s objections is the claim that there are meaning-bearing phenomena and practices that pervade human life that cannot properly be described as either the active exercise of conceptual capacities or their non-enacted operation. Since these unaccounted for phenomena and practices are so pervasive and deep-seated, the human life form in general cannot properly be described as that of the rational animal either.

However, in addition to pointing to meaning-bearing phenomena that cannot be described as the exercise or operation of conceptual capacities, Dreyfus makes the more general objection that the very distinction between exercised and operative capacities is incoherent. If this objection is valid, then McDowell’s position would be self-undermining and there would be no need to undermine it further by invoking phenomenological considerations. So let us briefly consider the general objection first. It does not follow from the fact that capacities are exercised ‘on occasion’, Dreyfus claims, that they are nonetheless

‘operative’ and pervade activities even when they are not exercised. ‘Capacities can’t pervade anything’, he writes, and to suppose they do is to make a ‘category mistake’.¹⁴ Dreyfus’s objection comes down to the thought that operative but non-enacted capacities are metaphysically ‘spooky’, to borrow one of McDowell’s favoured locutions,¹⁵ or as a category mistake is more conventionally described, an illusion based on faulty logic. But whether or not McDowell’s specific application of the distinction between enacted and operative capacities in the case of perception is true, the distinction itself is surely not unintelligible (or intelligible only as conceptual confusion). One does not have to be a card-carrying Aristotelian to grasp the idea that a capacity can make something the distinctive thing that it is, and so lend it its identity, both on the occasions when that capacity is actually exercised, and on those when it is not but *could* be. If the potential for a capacity to be exercised determines the nature or specific character of a thing as much as the actual exercise of it, there is a sense in which the capacity can be said to ‘pervade’ it as the kind of thing that it is, whatever the circumstances. The potential for the capacity to be exercised could in such cases reasonably be said to ‘permeate’ or ‘pervade’ the behaviour of the subject of the capacity, because it is in virtue of having that capacity that the subject is what it is. Even if it is conceded that the merely potential exercise of a capacity does not have the same *degree* of reality as a capacity that on a given occasion is actually exercised, it still seems reasonable to describe it as having more reality than a capacity that was not there at all. This difference could be marked by saying that the capacity was ‘operative’ without being actualised or exercised. In any case, Dreyfus’s assertion that the very idea of non-enacted but operative capacities rests on a category mistake seems to reflect either a blinkeredness to the sense-making resources of the distinction between actuality and potentiality, or perhaps just a positivist-like refusal to countenance it, rather than a judicious assessment of its worth.¹⁶

It is, however, at the phenomenological (rather than logical or metaphysical) level that Dreyfus develops his case. His first move is to invoke a phenomenon which seems to show the *limited scope* of rationality even in McDowell's expanded sense of conceptual capacity. This is the phenomenon of everyday coping, which involves a specific mode of comportment or relation to the world Dreyfus (following Heidegger) calls 'involvement'. In everyday coping activity, such as turning a door knob upon leaving a room, keeping one's balance while walking along an uneven path, or holding a hammer while joining some wood, one simply deals with the situation one is in without reflecting upon anything or noticing any conceptual or propositional 'content'. Rather than having properties of objects 'in mind' – such as the shape of the doorknob, the direction of the path, the weight of the hammer – which are ready for some conceptualising operation which may or may not be enacted (the assertion 'that doorknob is round', 'this path is uneven' etc), we simply cope with the environment by pre-reflectively responding to whatever opportunities for or obstacles to action it affords. Our relation to the world in the course of everyday coping is not *external* to it, there is no 'standing back' or 'free, distanced orientation', which McDowell, following Gadamer, attributes to rational animals on account of their linguistic powers.¹⁷ Rather, coping activity unfolds 'in the midst' of the world, as involvement in it. Conceptual understanding, which at its best 'takes in' the facts or 'discloses the world', in McDowell's sense, should then be understood as a latecomer, arriving on the scene when the flow of unreflective coping is disrupted. At that point, 'objects' as such, with determinate properties that fall under concepts, come to our attention. Conceptual capacities can now come into play (or become 'operative'). But firstly and for the most part, Dreyfus argues, human beings have to cope without concepts, they do so without being 'mindful' of the matter of their copings, and they manage it quite proficiently.

Dreyfus's first charge, then, is that by presenting a picture of the human being as the rational animal, rational in virtue of its conceptual capacities, McDowell unwittingly screens out the phenomena of everyday coping, characterised by involvement rather than detachment or distance, thus giving a distorted intellectualist picture of the human being, since everyday coping not only permeates human life much more extensively than conceptual operations do, but it also provides the background against which conceptual capacities themselves emerge. How damaging is this charge, recalling that McDowell's attempt at rehabilitating the idea of the rational animal is supposed to go by way of a non-intellectualist, engaged conception of rationality? At the core of that conception, we have seen, is the idea that conceptual capacities are operative even when they are not actively exercised, and that, for the most part, they are operative *without* being actively exercised. In the case of everyday unreflective coping, this means that we do indeed do things like reach for the doorknob, retain our balance while keeping to a rough track, and join wood with a hammer and nail, without actively or reflectively applying concepts. And it does seem that McDowell can consistently uphold that view while also maintaining that any particular, circumscribed set of affordances, or 'for the sake of' at stake in such coping activity, *can* be transposed into the content of a conceptual formulation, if that is called for. This capacity to be responsive to reasons 'as such' does not exclude responsiveness to reasons 'in the shape of affordances'. To insist that reasons cannot *in principle* take that shape does seem to be presuming an unnecessarily restrictive -- McDowell would say intellectualist -- conception of reasons and rationality.

Part of the difficulty in weighing up the force of Dreyfus's first charge is a lack of clarity about what exactly it is on account of which 'involvement' and 'coping' get squeezed out of the picture in McDowell's view. What, in McDowell's account, do involvement and coping stand in *contrast* to? No one has done more than Dreyfus to show that involvement, as

a term of art in existential phenomenology, stands in contrast to *representation*. It is meant as a corrective to Cartesian and empiricist conceptions of the mind as the realm of the ‘inner’, as a series of discrete mental items variously labelled ‘ideas’, ‘impressions’, ‘sense data’ and so forth. While the Cartesian / empiricist ‘inner theatre’ view of the mind can seem natural from the disengaged, reflective stance of the theoretical observer -- such as it seemed to Locke when examining the ‘furniture of the mind’ -- it is not, for the existential phenomenologist, how we originally experience things. The task of existential phenomenology is to ‘retrieve’ that original meaning by way of a vocabulary that better approximates to the phenomena. The problem here is that, in McDowell’s case, there is no obvious equivalent to the classical Cartesian or empiricist idea of mental representation that stands in need of correction by such an existential-phenomenological vocabulary, and in particular by talk of involvement. This is why McDowell can simply deny that involvement goes missing in his account, and insist on the contrary that the world discloses itself precisely to a subject involved or *engaged* in the world, albeit through the passive or active exercise of conceptual capacities.

If the contrast with involvement in McDowell’s account is somewhat obscure, so is the contrast with coping.¹⁸ It is clear that coping is practical and unreflective, in a way that contrasts with theory, explicitly articulated understanding, and reflection. But it is just as clear that conceptuality, in McDowell’s stipulated sense, does not belong on the other side of that contrast, that is, as the antithetical ‘other’ of coping. On the face of it, the operation of conceptual capacities typically has these ‘coping’-like characteristics itself, insofar as our responsiveness to reasons goes by way of immediate, untheorised, unreflective action. Even conceptual activity in more fully-fledged forms of explicit linguistic expression, such as participation in a conversation, has certain resemblances to coping activity: what fundamental difference in kind is there between the flow of my engagement with the uneven path and the

flow of the conversation I am having with my walking partner? It also seems obvious that we can draw on conceptual capacities to help us cope better. By listening, talking, and learning the relevant concepts, we can become more proficient at coping in all sorts of contexts. So if the contrast between coping and conceptual capacity is to be as emphatic as Dreyfus claims it to be, if coping is to serve as the radical antithesis of rationality understood as conceptual capacity, some further argument is needed to demonstrate it.

4. Expertise and absorption

This brings us to the second charge, which Dreyfus himself acknowledges is needed to supplement the first. He accepts that concept-acquisition and concept-application can be of use in learning how to cope. Indeed, it is an important part of learning how to cope skilfully, of learning a skill. However, it is more characteristic of the *learning* of a skill than the *fully formed* expression of the skill itself. Or if, following Dreyfus's five-staged model of skill acquisition, we think of skill as a developmental process that begins with the novice stage and develops through competency and proficiency to expertise, then concept-application belongs to the early to middle phase.¹⁹ The novice in a skill, or someone who has achieved competency in it, has learnt to follow the relevant rules and can perform the skill at a moderate level by leaning on their conceptual understanding. But skilful coping at its best, or most fully developed form, does without such support. For expert coping, or expertise, is characterised not by conceptual understanding, or 'thoughts' about what to do, but by *absorption* in the task. Coping at its best, or expert coping, in other words, is a matter not just of involvement, but absorption, where absorption stands in contrast to having thoughts, being directed by thoughts, possessing or applying concepts.

But why suppose that the transition from competency to expertise involves the transcendence of thought or conceptuality? Because, Dreyfus argues, expertise or expert

coping is *negated* by the attempt to think or reason it through. Thoughts or concepts serve to disrupt the absorption of the expert and in doing so bring down the level of performance to competence at best and ineptitude at worst. Dreyfus uses the story of the famous baseball player Chuck Knoblauch to illustrate the worst case scenario.²⁰ Knoblauch had been a highly accomplished second baseman until he started to think about the ‘mechanics’ of what he was doing when he was throwing the ball. As soon as he started to reflect upon his performance, to monitor ‘from a distance’ what was going on when he performed, the performance itself deteriorated dramatically. Unable to resist the urge to stand back, reflect and conceptualise his movements, he could no longer do the routine throws which, in his previous absorbed state, came smoothly and effortlessly. What the Knoblauch case shows, Dreyfus contends, is that thought, mindedness and conceptuality are the ‘enemy’ of expertise, of the excellence that only expertise can manifest.²¹ It shows, allegedly, that the ‘free, distanced orientation’ to the world characteristic of the rational animal, which it has on account of its initiation into language, or conceptual capacities in McDowell’s stipulated sense, prevents us from coping well. Coping at its best, exemplified by Knoblauch before he stepped back from his embodied situation, before he became ‘a full-time rational animal’ (as Dreyfus puts it) by trying to conceptualize his situation, requires absorption *as opposed to* thought, conceptuality or rationality, even in McDowell’s sense.²²

There are many points that could be raised in response to this objection but for current purposes three will suffice. First, while it is clear that *something* went seriously wrong with Knoblauch’s performance, and that this something had to do with a disruption to his absorption or ‘flow’ in the game (rather than injury), it is not so obvious that the agent of disruption, so to speak, was *thinking* or the intrusion of conceptual capacities. On the face of it, the loss of performance could just as well be described as resulting from a *dislocation* of

the absorption, from absorption being involuntarily re-directed to the wrong thing (the self rather than the game). It would not obviously be distorting the phenomenon to say that Knoblauch became self-absorbed, or at least inappropriately absorbed in isolated aspects of his performance that were abstracted from the concrete demands of the situation. That interpretation would be supported by considering an analogous case that could affect the person with practical wisdom (*phronimos*). The *phronimos* who had cultivated the habit of responding to the full demands of moral situations in just the right way could find herself puzzled by and reflecting on the meaning of the terms she used in her judgements ('hold on, what exactly does it mean to be generous?') as Knoblauch became puzzled by the position of his hand while throwing the ball. The isolation of the hand movement from the normal flow, and its abstraction from the whole context of the action, could reasonably be described as the main culprits behind the degraded performance. Since those same culprits could also be responsible for shortcomings in the behaviour of McDowell's archetype for excellence in the exercise of conceptual capacities, the *phronimos*, they can hardly be identified with the intrusion of those capacities. And more generally, expertise in linguistic skills would hardly be helped by isolation and abstraction of their elements in the performance itself. That would be a recipe for the kind of paralysis that ruined Knoblauch's game.

Second, however we characterise the 'stepping back' that led to Knoblauch losing his skill, it definitely should not be equated with the very general 'free, distanced orientation' that, according to Gadamer and McDowell, language makes possible. The orientation Gadamer and McDowell speak of has to do with the meanings, norms and standards that language opens up and that enable subjects to inhabit a world rather than control or optimally equilibrate with an environment. The rational animal, in the Gadamer/McDowell sense, can orient itself in relation to truth, truthfulness, rightness, beauty, the sublime, and so forth, and

is free in the sense that qualitatively distinct modes of being disclosed by language become possibilities for it. That does require a certain distance from instinctive impulse and the immediate affordances of a given environment, but it is a ‘free’ distance on account of the richer possibilities initiation into language offers (including possibilities of retrieving proximity with the instinctual and environmental realm). The paradoxical proximity through distance of the rational animal, its distinctive freedom through constraint, was expressed by Merleau-Ponty himself in his famous remark that human being (Dasein) is ‘condemned to meaning’, and of course Gadamer’s own formulation of this basic insight owes much to Heidegger as well.²³ When the Gadamer/McDowell idea of the free, distanced orientation of the human being *qua* rational animal is put in its proper hermeneutic context, it becomes clear that it is not only very different from the objectifying reflexive orientation Knoblauch adopted to himself, but that it is actually quite at odds with such an orientation. Far from conceiving the mature human being as essentially a sovereign rational subject on account of its capacity to stand back, in the sense of disengage, objectify and so on, the hermeneutic tradition in which Gadamer and McDowell stand conceives of human freedom and rationality as inescapably situated, embodied, finite and historical. McDowell’s frequent rejections of Neurath’s model of reflection, and Gadamer’s almost obsessive insistence on the finitude of human understanding, provide vivid examples of how the notion of a free, distanced orientation, and its counterpart the classical idea of the rational animal, might be retrieved independently of the notion of the sovereign rational subject Dreyfus rightly wants to discard.²⁴

It is questionable, then, whether the ‘stepping back’ that was Knoblauch’s downfall was due to the intrusion of conceptualisation on his part, and it certainly doesn’t seem right to characterise his detachment from his game-situation as tantamount to the ‘free, distanced

orientation' that language in general provides. But the third point I would like to raise about the Knoblauch case concerns not so much the felicity of its philosophical characterisation as its empirical validity. Dreyfus claims that the non-conceptual intentionality of expertise, such as Knoblauch enjoyed before he started to think about it, is confirmed by recent scientific research, particularly 'current neurological models of skilled action'.²⁵ The phenomenon that impresses Dreyfus, backed up by these models, is the apparent lack of bodily awareness that accompanies the bodily skill.²⁶ But the more salient issue, so far as the dispute with McDowell goes, is the *conceptual* embeddedness of highly skilled embodied activity. And there is evidence to suggest that embodied skills, or skills that on the face of it are remote from operations of the intellect, are nonetheless permeated by conceptual understanding. Mike Rose gives plenty of examples in his book *The Mind at Work*.²⁷ Two, I think, are especially telling. One is the testimony of a professional carpenter who insists that 'there's always some element of awareness to the work, for safety, but also because the task at hand will have its own demands, require its own minor adjustments'.²⁸ Expert hammer strokes, it seems, are not as 'mindless' as Dreyfus's Heidegger suggests. This is not just the view of the experts themselves, but is reinforced by empirical studies, such as one Rose cites on blacksmithing, which concluded that 'skilled performances [are] conceptually embedded even when immediate events press an agent to react seemingly without thinking'.²⁹ Another striking example Rose gives of the conceptual embeddedness of embodied skill is expert physiotherapy. The expert physical therapist, as described by Rose, has practical knowledge that 'fuses touch and concept'.³⁰ Expertise in physiotherapy comes by way of a capacity to make ever finer conceptual discriminations (discriminations concerning the 'resistance' of the patient's musculoskeletal structure) *through* the hand. Rather than describing the expert as 'withdrawing' from the conceptually disclosed world, as Dreyfus urges we do, Rose suggests

it is truer to the phenomenon to speak of an *integration* of ‘hand’ and ‘idea’, of embodiment and conceptuality.³¹

Rose’s primary concern is with dismantling sociological and anthropological distinctions that hide the intellectual skills required of physical labour. He aims, and succeeds, in revealing the operation of conceptual capacities in places where, due to ideological distortions, the denizens of modern societies least expect them: the carpenter’s workshop, the physiotherapist’s clinic, the hairstylist’s salon, and so forth. While Rose is certainly no ‘intellectualist’ – on the contrary it is the very privileging of ‘intellectual’ as opposed to ‘manual’ or ‘embodied’ work that he attacks – the success of his strategy of searching for the mind or conceptuality at work where it is least expected speaks better for McDowell’s position (that human practices are permeated by mindedness) than for Dreyfus’s. In the next section I will consider another of McDowell’s unexpected allies.

5. Zidane

We have seen that for Dreyfus, McDowell’s claim that conceptual capacities permeate human experience must be false because it is untrue to the phenomenon of absorption. Conceptuality is nowhere to be seen, Dreyfus insists, in the absorbed experience of the expert coper. On the contrary, as the Chuck Knoblauch story allegedly shows, absorption is inconsistent with the exercise of conceptual capacities, since it requires a stepping back from ‘the flow’. I have just considered evidence to suggest that expertise can be conceptually shaped or conceptually embedded in ways that normally escape attention. But what about the phenomenology of absorption? Do the best descriptions of absorption, or the most perspicuous representations of it, reveal it to be shorn of conceptuality?

If the art historian Michael Fried is right, an illuminating source for thinking about this question is practices of portraiture. It makes a big difference, according to Fried's general account of the history of portraiture and its role in the development of modern art, whether the subject of the portrait is theatrically open to view, and as it were 'on show', to be 'beheld', or absorbed in an activity independent of that of being depicted, and thus of being beheld.³² The absorption of the subject thus changes (in a progressive way, according to Fried) the way a portrait is seen, and more generally, it opens up new possibilities for how art can work. The exploration of what Fried calls 'absorptive strategies' has been responsible for much of what is admirable and progressive in modern art, Fried argues, and a fine recent example of it is provided by Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's film *Zidane: A Twenty-First Century Portrait* (2006).³³

The film is a recording of a La Liga soccer game played between Real Madrid and Villareal at the Bennebeu stadium in Madrid, with the peculiarity that all the cameras (seventeen of them) are on Zidane. So it is a representation of the game as 'lived' by the player, of the player as 'living' or being absorbed in the game. The cameras were arranged around the stadium by the artists, who were able to ask each camera operator to get close ups, pull backs and so on while watching the game on monitors in a trailer outside the stadium. They then edited and montaged the takes into a continuous record of the game, focused entirely on Zidane, accompanied by sound from the game (including cheers and groans from the crowd, the heavy breathing of players galloping on the turf, physical contact between the players, and so on), music by Mogwai, Spanish television commentary, silent periods, and some of Zidane's own thoughts as subtitled text.

As Fried points out, Zidane is 'wholly absorbed' for almost the complete duration of the film and his 'total engagement' in the match is manifest throughout.³⁴ Fried draws

attention to Zidane's 'impassiveness' – his facial expression remains more or less the same and he seems hardly affected by the score – as if there is nothing or little of his 'self' in play. His seemingly effortless expertise, especially in controlling the ball, in keeping his balance when challenged by other players, and as Fried also observes, his 'instantaneous decision-making' (about where to move, whom to pass to and when, whether to pass short or long, etc), is also plain to see.³⁵ Although the action is discontinuous – Zidane comes in and out of the game, as we say, and does not have much possession of the ball – he seems to be very much 'in the flow', as Dreyfus puts it. Indeed, the apparent absence of a 'subject', the seeming effortlessness of the skill, the instantaneous, reflection-less decision-taking, and Zidane's palpable immersion in the flow of the game, all seem to confirm Dreyfus's phenomenological points about absorbed, expert coping. McDowell's picture of skilled, embodied coping as being permeated by conceptual capacities hardly seems to fit at all.

And yet in a long footnote to his essay on *Zidane*, Fried makes a comment on the debate between Dreyfus and McDowell in which he comes down on McDowell's side. Zidane is the consummate expert coper, 'totally engaged' and 'wholly absorbed' in the match, but this engagement and absorption, as it is portrayed in the film, according to Fried's convincing interpretation, is not to the *exclusion* of conceptuality. This is a general impression one gets from the film, but there are specific features of its portraiture, of the 'absorptive strategies' it deploys, that incline one to this view. In particular, Zidane's engagement and absorption in the game is faithfully represented as *bound up* with his awareness of 'being beheld' – by the cameras and by the crowd. The success of this representation of engagement and absorption, Fried suggests, reflects the interplay of absorption and mindedness in the phenomenon itself. This interplay comes out most vividly in the complex and subtle if fragmented awareness Zidane has of the spectators during play

(as recounted by Zidane in the subtitles). Zidane's awareness of the voices projected from the crowd, as well as the tense silences, is clearly conceptual, but it is integral to the whole unfolding of his experience of the game in a way that is difficult to define (Fried proposes it may be another 'channel of absorption' or 'psychic counter-movement'; at any rate not mere distraction understood as the negation of absorption).³⁶ What does emerge strikingly is the intensity and complexity of Zidane's 'minded' condition. Summing up in his footnote, Fried describes the film as 'a singularly perspicuous example of what it might look like to an ideally situated observer (one "constructed" by the film) for experience, perception, and "coping" of the most instantaneous and resourceful kind to be "permeated by mindedness" in McDowell's sense of the phrase'.³⁷

Of course it doesn't follow from Zidane's *saying* that he is aware of the crowd while absorbed in the game, in a way that doesn't necessarily impede his performance, that conceptual capacities really are operative in McDowell's sense in the course of his expert coping. And it doesn't follow from *Zidane*'s singular depiction of expert coping, as interpreted by Fried, that fully engaged, wholly absorbed expert performance really is 'permeated by mindedness'. Neither the personal testimony of Zidane the expert footballer nor the theoretically informed interpretation of Fried the expert art critic proves anything here. But alongside the considerations I have already presented about the conceptual embeddedness of manual skills, they do add to the impression that conceptuality, in a suitably specified sense, need not be the enemy of expert coping Dreyfus claims it to be.

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Dreyfus's legitimate concern is that conceptuality or rationality, when it is taken as the mark of the human without being suitably specified, distorts some fundamental human phenomena, in particular those of involvement (everyday coping) and absorption (expert coping). His

response to this concern is to present these phenomena as if they had nothing to do with conceptuality or rationality at all. He draws encouragement for this strategy from the insights of existential phenomenology. While I have questioned whether these insights compel the strategy Dreyfus takes, I do not mean to suggest that a suitable specification of conceptuality can be arrived at without taking them into account. Merleau-Ponty's key idea that each part of the perceptual field 'announces more than it contains', for example, reveals a structure of lived experience that may not obviously exclude the exercise of conceptual capacities, but the sense in which it can be said to be permeated by those capacities is *still to be* specified. And while it may be an exaggeration to say that absorbed, expert coping is 'mindless' on account of it not having fully-fledged conceptual intentionality, it remains unclear from McDowell's specification how conceptual capacities are operative in the many cases where practical intelligence 'runs ahead' of consciousness and the capacity of the agent to say or verbalize what is known. Merleau-Ponty and others rightly insist on the difficulty of recovering, from the position available to reflection, all the complexity, all the various demands and affordances, of the original unreflective act-situation. Perhaps those demands and affordances that we unreflectively cope with in skilled action are never *fully* available to reflection. If so, it would *only* be by actually coping with them, by successfully performing the task, by doing it the right way, that our practical intelligence is revealed to us. The sense in which distinctively conceptual capacities are operative in such revelations also stands in need of further specification.

If my argument in this paper is on the right track, Dreyfus's strategy of rejecting McDowell's project of rehabilitating the idea of the rational animal by way of linking it with the idea of engagement is *logically* and *phenomenologically* underdetermined. It is logically under-determined, so I argued in section 3, insofar as it is not based on a demonstrated

contradiction in the very idea of capacities that are operative without being actively exercised. It is phenomenologically underdetermined, I argued in sections 4 and 5, because it is not based on uncontested or uncontroversial interpretations of the phenomena that purportedly preclude the operation of such capacities, namely absorption and expertise. But the logical and phenomenological under-determination of Dreyfus's strategy does not make it arbitrary. This is because Dreyfus has broadly *ethical* reasons for adopting it, reasons that have to do with a conception of what human beings are *at their best* that conflicts with the idea of the human being as the rational animal, notwithstanding McDowell's progressive specification of that idea.

To see how broadly speaking ethical reasons come into play, it helps to think back to Brandom's rationalism, which I mentioned in my introductory remarks. Recall that Brandom, following Kant and Hegel, explicitly attributes the progressive character of the rationalism he endorses to the strong link it forges between rationality, conceptuality and freedom. The rational animal, *qua* 'concept-mongerer', is bound by norms, and it is just by taking responsibility for the norms that bind us that we achieve freedom in a fully-fledged, distinctively human sense. The more we take responsibility for ourselves, the more fully free we become, the closer we get to realizing our humanity. McDowell's progressive rationalism, if we can call it that – his 'engaged', non-intellectualist reformulation of the idea of the rational animal -- is driven by a similar intuition. Also following Kant and Hegel, McDowell takes rational animals to be special because they are 'capable of *self-determination*'.³⁸ For McDowell rational self-determination is a fully-fledged form of conceptual capacities in operation, and although to my knowledge McDowell is not explicit on this, it does seem to be an implication of his position that the life form most suited to the rational animal is one that is most congenial to self-determining action. But this is not how things seem from Dreyfus's

standpoint. Dreyfus does mention as a point of agreement with McDowell that ‘McDowell defends what looks like the existential phenomenologist’s view that human beings are at their best when involved in action’.³⁹ But it is a fundamental point of disagreement between them that it is in *self-determining* action, or fully fledged rational action, that human beings show themselves at their best. Taking his orientation from Heidegger, Dreyfus is convinced that human beings are at their heroic best not when they are (or strive to be) accountable to themselves, but when they allow themselves to be moved and inspired by forces *outside* them.⁴⁰

These two opposing ethical standpoints need to be centrally in view if we are to get to the bottom of the debate between McDowell and Dreyfus. But I will have to leave consideration of the relative validity of those standpoints to another occasion.⁴¹

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¹ See for example R. Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, Cambridge MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009; E. Hammer ed., *German Idealism: Contemporary Perspectives*, London, Routledge, 2007; T. Pinkard, *Hegel’s Naturalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012; R. Pippin, *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008; and P. Stekeler-Weithofer, ‘Persons and Practices’, in A. Laitinen and H. Ikäheimo eds, *Dimensions of Personhood*, Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2007, pp. 174-198.

² Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, p. 2.

³ See especially J. McDowell, *The Engaged Intellect*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2009.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

⁵ The titles of the essays by McDowell are ‘What Myth?’ and ‘Response to Dreyfus’, which originally appeared alongside Dreyfus’s essays ‘The Return of the Myth of the Mental’ and ‘Response to McDowell’ in *Inquiry*, 50: 4, 2007. Their positions have been developed and discussed more recently in Joseph K. Schear ed. *Mind, Reason and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*, London, Routledge, 2013. My own paper was written prior to the publication of that volume and without seeing its contents. Other interesting contributions to the debate triggered by the Dreyfus/McDowell exchange I’m aware of are E. Rietveld, ‘McDowell and Dreyfus on Unreflective Action’, *Inquiry*, 53:2, 2010, 183-207, G. Gottlieb, ‘Unreflective Action and the Argument from Speed’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 92, 2011, 338-362, and P. Dennis, ‘Was Heidegger a Conceptualist?’, *Ratio*, 25:1, 2012, 108-117.

⁶ Though the attempt is also clearly manifest in essays such as ‘Deliberation and Moral Development in Aristotle’s *Ethics*’ (included in *The Engaged Intellect*) and several of the essays collected in McDowell’s *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel and Sellars*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2009.

⁷ Tyler Burge is another of McDowell's critics who explicitly rejects the idea of the rational animal. For Dreyfus's rejection of the idea, see Dreyfus, 'Detachment, Involvement, and Rationality: are we Essentially Rational Animals?', *Human Affairs*, 17: 2, 2007, 101-109.

⁸ McDowell, 'Conceptual Capacities in Perception', in *Having the World in View*, p. 128.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ See McDowell, *Having the World in View*, p. 135.

¹¹ See McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 84ff.

¹² Indeed, McDowell takes Aristotle's account to exemplify the structure of engaged rationality as such, not just rationality that is manifest in morally exemplary action.

¹³ McDowell, 'What Myth?', *Inquiry*, 50:4, 2007, p. 341.

¹⁴ Dreyfus, 'Response to McDowell', p. 372.

¹⁵ McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 82.

¹⁶ Dreyfus argues elsewhere that human beings are not 'essentially rational animals' (see note 7). But it is worth remarking that unless it makes sense to distinguish actuality and potentiality along the lines just sketched, there would be no point to the concept of essence, and it would be meaningless to suppose that human beings are essentially *anything*, never mind rational animals.

¹⁷ H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, London, Sheed and Ward, 1989 [1960], p. 445, cited by McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 116.

¹⁸ See J. Rouse, 'Coping and its Contrasts', in M. Wrathall and J. Malpas eds, Heidegger, *Coping and Cognitive Science*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 2000, pp. 7-28, and by the same author, 'What is Conceptually Articulated Understanding?', <https://wesfiles.wesleyan.edu/home/jrouse/DreyMcDPap.doc>, downloaded 22/05/2010.

¹⁹ The five-stage model is elaborated in S. E. Dreyfus and H. L. Dreyfus, *Mind Over Machine*, New York, The Free Press, 1986.

²⁰ Dreyfus, 'The Return of the Myth of the Mental', p. 354.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 354.

²³ See M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. C. Smith, London, Routledge, 1962 [1945], p. xix. Heidegger himself writes: 'The human being is a creature of distance! And only by way of the real primordial distance that the human in his transcendence establishes toward all beings does the true nearness to things begin to grow in him'. M. Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, tr. M. Heim, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992 [1928], p. 221. It is in this spirit of Heidegger's that Gadamer speaks of a 'free, distanced orientation'.

²⁴ See for example J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, and H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, London, Sheed and Ward, 1989 [1960]. Furthermore, Gadamer makes many of the anti-subjectivist points about involvement and absorption Dreyfus credits to Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty in his famous discussion of play in *Truth and Method*.

²⁵ Dreyfus, 'Response to McDowell', p. 377, note 4.

²⁶ The empirical support for Dreyfus's claim that attention to skill is detrimental to its performance at peak level is questioned in B. Montero, 'Does Bodily Awareness Interfere with Highly Skilled Movement?', *Inquiry*, 53:2, 2010, 105-122. Both the empirical and phenomenological accuracy of this claim in relation to expert cricket batting are critically examined in J. Sutton, 'Batting, Habit and Memory: The Embodied Mind and the Nature of Skill', *Sport in Society*, 10:5, 763-786.

²⁷ M. Rose, *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*, Penguin, New York, 2004.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²⁹ *Ibid.* The conclusion cited is from Charles M. Keller and Janet D. Keller, *Cognition and Tool Use: The Blacksmith at Work*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 174.

³⁰ Rose, *The Mind at Work*, p. 152.

³¹ Compare John Haugeland, *Having Thought* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1998), chapter 9, where Haugeland invokes the '*integralness* of mind, body and world' and the '*intimacy* of the mind's embodiment and embeddedness in the world', as the most effective way of overcoming traditional intellectualist distortions about the mind (p. 208).

³² For a recent formulation of this thesis see M. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Never Before*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2008.

³³ See *Ibid.*, pp. 226-233.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 228, 230.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 228.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 231.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 233.

³⁸ McDowell, *Having the World in View*, p. 138.

³⁹ Dreyfus, 'Response to McDowell', pp. 372-373.

⁴⁰ See H.L Dreyfus and S.D. Kelly, *All Things Shining*, New York, Free Press, 2011.

⁴¹ I try to map out the ethical issues at stake in the debate between McDowell and Dreyfus in a book I am currently working on. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 'Engaging McDowell' conference held in Sydney in July 2010 and the Social Philosophy Kolloquium at Goethe Universität Frankfurt in November 2010. Sincere thanks to those who invited me to speak and gave feedback on those occasions, especially Daniel Loick, David Macarthur, John McDowell, Huw Price, Paul Redding, Titus Stahl, and Frieder Vogelmann. Thanks too to Susan Best and Richard Menary for insightful and encouraging discussions.