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Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate.

New York: Routledge 2013.

350 pages

\$150.00 (Hardback ISBN 9780415485869)

In his 2005 Pacific APA Presidential Address, Hubert Dreyfus initiated a debate with John McDowell over the legacy of Wilfrid Sellars's criticisms of C. I. Lewis for epistemology and philosophy of mind. Though Dreyfus applauded Sellars's criticism of 'the Myth of the Given', he warned that the pendulum had swung to the opposing extreme, to what he called 'the Myth of the Mental': that rational mindedness pervades all of our experience. This debate continued at the 2006 Eastern APA (subsequently published in *Inquiry* as Dreyfus 2007a, 2007b and McDowell 2007a, 2007b) and now with the outstanding collection of papers edited by Joseph Schear. The debate concerns the role and scope of rationality in human life, how to describe the similarities and differences between rational and non-rational animals, and the relevance of phenomenology for philosophy of mind (and vice versa). I presume that Dreyfus would agree with McDowell that '[t]here is more to our embodied coping than there is to the embodied coping of non-rational animals' (2007a, 344). But how is this 'more' to be understood? Should we agree with Dreyfus that embodied coping is a 'ground-floor' that supports the 'upper stories' of the space of reasons? If non-rational animals are perceptually sensitive to their *environments* and only rational animals experience a *world* (since both Dreyfus and McDowell endorse Heidegger's environment/world distinction), what does 'experience of a world' have that 'awareness of an environment' lacks? In lieu of a consensus, Schear's anthology provides a rich plurality of responses.

Part I, 'A Battle of Myths', pairs two original articles by Dreyfus and McDowell that restate their views and how they understand the debate. Dreyfus alleges that McDowell holds 'the Myth of the Pervasiveness of the Mental', a 'transcendental claim that, in order for the mind to be related to the world at all, *every* way we relate to the world must be pervaded by self-critical conceptuality' (16). As Dreyfus sees it, McDowell transcendently argues for 'distance' between mind and world, but phenomenology shows that there is no 'distance' in absorbed coping, so distance cannot be constitutive of human experience. We can avoid the Myth of the Given by accepting a 'third space' (neither causes nor reasons) that is a space of 'meaning', a 'holistic, pervasive, prelinguistic, preconceptual background in which we are always already absorbed' (27)—a space explored by Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, but for which McDowell has no room.

By contrast, McDowell alleges that Dreyfus holds 'the Myth of the Mind as Detached': that the context-free deployment of conceptuality (e.g. reflection) is sufficient to tell us what conceptuality itself really is. If we accept that 'in experiencing itself, capacities that belong to their subjective rationality are in play' (42), then we should reject 'the assumption that rational mindedness is always detached, so that it must be absent from the absorbed coping that occupies the ground floor' (65). Even the absorbed coping of rational animals is pervaded by the kind of concepts that rational animals possess and non-rational animals do not, which is why our experiences of the world can play an epistemic function for us—for example, in giving us reasons for our judgments—just as we can give reasons for our actions, and not just for mere bits of behavior. Importantly, Dreyfus and McDowell worry that the Myth each discerns in the other is a lingering vestige of the Cartesianism that each regards himself as having overcome.

The next four parts of the book deal with historical context, metaphilosophical issues, the role of understanding in experience, the debate about conceptual and nonconceptual content, and the relation between bodily skills, self-consciousness, and rationality.

Part II, 'From Kant to Existential Phenomenology', contains essays by Taylor, Pippin, Gardner, and Braver. Taylor reconstructs the motivations and consequences of Descartes's revolution in epistemology and how Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty disclose (in somewhat different ways) how the structure of the Cartesian picture can remain in the background of thinkers who explicitly repudiate some particular feature of it, allowing him to conclude that 'the interesting debate between John McDowell and Hubert Dreyfus, and the way in which their differences have been clarified and refined, is an index of the progress we have made in recent decades' (87). Pippin, by contrast, uses close interpretations of Kant, Hegel, and Sellars to argue that if we accept that rational animals have unity of apperception and non-rational animals do not, the issue concerns the different 'modes of actualization' of conceptual capacities in experience and judgment, not whether experience has a different *kind* of content. The metaphilosophical stakes of the debate are raised by Gardner, who uses a close reading of Kant and post-Kantian idealism (Fichte, Maimon, Reinhold, and Hegel) to pose a contrast between Dreyfus's post-transcendental use of phenomenology for naturalistic philosophy of mind and McDowell's quasi-transcendental philosophical therapeutics. In posing this contrast, Gardner implicitly asks whether either Dreyfus or McDowell are entitled to regard themselves as carrying out the transcendental program of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. Finally, Braver proposes a resolution to the debate with a phenomenological description of reflective thinking itself that shows how absorbed coping is at work in intellectual as well as bodily activity.

In Part III ('Intellectualism and Understanding'), Carman, Noë, and Siewart challenge the thesis that our experience is pervaded by conceptual activity. Carman agrees with Dreyfus that McDowell is committed to the pervasiveness of the mental, but worries that Dreyfus's comparison of human experience with animal perception obscures the issues. Instead he offers a phenomenology of conversation to indicate specifically human forms of intelligibility distinct from reason-giving. In contrast, Noë appeals to Wittgenstein and Gibson to de-intellectualize the understanding itself, as further suggested by the insight that aesthetic experience is deeply and essentially human, and that aesthetic criticism plays a constitutive role in that experience. For his part, Siewart asks what is necessary for experience to have an epistemic function for us, and points out that experience can play that function only if it 'outruns the application of our concepts' (208). He also raises (214-220) difficult interpretative questions about Merleau-Ponty that, in my view, make Merleau-Ponty less of an ally to Dreyfus because Merleau-Ponty de-intellectualizes the understanding, in contrast to Dreyfus's intellectualistic conception.

In Part IV ('Experience, Concepts, and Nonconceptual Content') we turn to the debate about conceptual and nonconceptual content, and not surprisingly, the two most typically 'analytic' contributions (by Crane and Schellenberg). Crane examines the history of the concept of 'content' and shows that there are at least two legitimate senses of content—what he calls 'the phenomenological sense' and 'the propositional sense'—both of which have a legitimate use in psychological explanation, even though the former plays no role in formal semantics *per se*.

In what is, in my opinion, the most promising way forward to *resolving* the McDowell-Dreyfus debate, Rouse argues that 'we should think of conceptual understanding as itself involving perceptual-practical skills that build upon Dreyfus's account' (255), and that such skills are

already teleological and normative—hence the normativity of conceptual activity *extends* the normativity of embodied coping. Rouse can be read, along with Braver, Noë, and Siewart, as ‘de-intellectualizing the understanding’: conceiving of conceptual activity as grounded in perceptual-practical skills rather than as standing in contrast to them.

Since the debate turns in part on the concept of ‘non-conceptual content’, Schellenberg poses an elegant trilemma to show that animals have content that discriminates particulars in their environment without possessing concepts, even if one accepts a Fregean view that content is constituted by modes of presentation. In that regard she clarifies what could be meant by ‘non-conceptual content’, especially as that term is used to specify what kind of content animals have. Though she notes that one could attribute conceptual content to animals, the result would be ‘relinquishing a unified view of concepts’, though she does not pursue this option beyond saying that it would involve ‘controversial views about concepts’ (279).

As it may be confusing as to what exactly the debate between McDowell and Dreyfus is really about, Schear’s essay focuses on two versions of McDowell’s thesis and two of Dreyfus’s arguments against it. The strong thesis is that rationality is *the* essence of human beings; the weak thesis is that rationality is *one* of our essential capacities. Schear argues that Dreyfus’s argument from the phenomenology of merging—that, in absorbed coping, the subject-object structure of consciousness disappears and we ‘merge’ with our environments—shows that the strong thesis cannot be right, though the weak thesis may well be.

Dreyfus’s central claim that ‘mindedness is the enemy of embodied coping’ (Dreyfus 2007a, 353) comes under close scrutiny by Montero, who draws on her expertise as both a philosopher and former professional ballet dancer to question whether ‘the principle of automaticity’ holds true of expert movements, and concludes that it does not. On the contrary, ‘the best performances also allow observers to witness deliberate, conscious thought in action, for a performance that proceeds entirely automatically would be flat’ (315). Though letting the mind wander does play some role in performance, it is not as central as Dreyfus makes it out to be.

Finally Zahavi draws extensively on the phenomenological tradition to criticize shared assumptions between McDowell and Dreyfus. Unlike Dreyfus, Zahavi thinks that absorbed coping necessarily involves subjectivity or a first-person stance—if it didn’t, then there couldn’t be a phenomenology of absorbed coping. In fact, Dreyfus succumbs to ‘the Myth of the Spectatorial Subject’ (332) in thinking that subjectivity is essentially a detached self-monitoring. But unlike McDowell, Zahavi does not think that subjectivity requires concepts, language, or rationality; hence he sees no reason to endorse McDowell’s qualification of non-rational animals as merely ‘protosubjective’ and not full-fledged subjects in their own right. In that sense, both Dreyfus’s notion of ‘mindlessness’ and McDowell’s notion of ‘mindedness’ should be rejected in favor of a better phenomenology of first-person experience.

Apart from the complex issues raised about experience, perception, action, conceptuality, rationality, embodiment, and subjectivity, the debate is also interesting because it takes place between the ‘analytic’ and ‘continental’ traditions. Dreyfus and McDowell each draw extensively on both traditions in their own work, and many of the contributors also draw on analytic philosophy of mind, cognitive science, and phenomenology. Though the idea of a divide between analytic and continental philosophy will probably (and unfortunately) dominate the profession for some time to come, both the debate itself and the articles about it are welcome indications that the

split between analytic and continental philosophy is not as stark as it used to be. But a note of caution—as Gardner says, ‘Fostering the interaction of analytic and continental philosophy does not after all, we should remind ourselves, require us to make their unification a regulative ideal’ (136). I concur.

References:

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