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# Response to McDowell

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I here summarize our discussion up to now by taking up two of John McDowell's central mentalist notions—Conceptuality and Mindedness—noting how I criticized what turned out to be misunderstandings of each, and then go on to summarize how I now understand them, and why I still can't accept McDowell's claim that they are pervasive.

## I. Conceptuality

Our debate got off to an embarrassing yet hopeful start with me assuming that concepts must be general and criticizing what I took to be McDowell's conceptualist account of *phronesis* on the basis of Heidegger's claim that the *phronemos* is responsive to the concrete, not the general, situation. In response, McDowell pointed out that on his view conceptuality is situation-specific—a view that he may have acquired indirectly from Heidegger by way of Charles Taylor and Hans-Georg Gadamer. It looked like we had a lot in common, but now I think that, while in fact we do, our differences are still significant.

For example, Heidegger holds that we use concepts in a situation-specific way when dealing with malfunctioning equipment—when, for example, we notice that this hammer is too heavy for this job, i.e. we notice it *as* too heavy. But Heidegger points out that most of our activities don't involve concepts at all. That is, they don't have a situation-specific “as structure”.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in our everyday coping, which he calls “pressing into possibilities”, we don't deal with objects with general properties like weight, nor with situation-specific aspects like too heavy. Rather, when everything is going well and we are absorbed in our coping, the equipment we are using

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“withdraws” (where, as we shall see, this does not mean becomes implicit). Then there is no place for a demonstrative concept pointing out our equipment *as* anything. We do not attribute a general property or even a situation-specific aspect to it; we just cope.

McDowell, however, doesn't ask how we experience things when we are absorbed in coping, but simply assumes that in general “our perceptual and active lives are conceptually shaped”. (p. 1) Indeed, that all our coping and everything we cope with is “permeated with conceptuality”. (p. 4) This conclusion is supposed to follow from the fact that if one has a *capacity*—in this case the capacity to use situation-specific concepts—this capacity must be “*operative*”, as McDowell puts it, in all situations whether or not I am aware of *exercising* it. Only thus could McDowell claim that concepts pervade all our coping activities, even absorbed coping where the equipment one is using and what one is doing with it must withdraw from our awareness if the coping is to proceed at its best.

This pervasiveness claim, however, seems to be based on a category mistake. Capacities are exercised on occasion, but that does not allow one to conclude that, even when they are not exercised, they are, nonetheless, “operative” and thus pervade all our activities. Capacities can't pervade anything. So, to describe the status of concepts that are somehow ‘operative’ even when they are not ‘experienced’ as operating, McDowell introduces the technical term ‘conceptuality’. (p. 1) But without any phenomenological description of just what it is like for our absorbed coping to be pervaded by conceptuality, it is not clear what meaning we should give to this term.

## II. Mindedness

McDowell begins his remarks by pointing out another misunderstanding on my part:

Dreyfus acknowledges that he was wrong to think practical intelligence (*phronesis*), as I conceive it, is situation-independent. But he still thinks my view of mindedness can be characterized in terms of “detached conceptual intentionality”. Now if you assume that mindedness is detached from immersion in activity, it is not surprising that mindedness should seem alien to the unreflective involvement that is characteristic of the exercise of skills. But the idea that mindedness is detached is just what I mean to oppose. The supposed Myth of the Mental is the result of reading me through the lens of what is by my lights a mythological conception of the mental. (p. 1)

I regret that I again assumed that McDowell holds the traditional view—this time the Platonic/Cartesian view—that mind at its best is detached from immersion in activity, while in fact McDowell defends what looks like the

existential phenomenologist's view that human beings are at their best when involved in action. But there is, nonetheless, a deep issue dividing us—an issue that is obscured by my failure to distinguish explicitly absorption from involvement.

I should have argued that subjectivity (not detachment) is the lingering ghost of the mental; that the necessity of “practical self-awareness in action” (p. 2) haunts McDowell's account of involved activity. McDowell holds that “openness to the world is enjoyed by *subjects* who are essentially agents”. (p. 5, my italics) Thus, to the question, “Who acts?” he responds: “the answer is ‘I do’”. According to McDowell this registers “the essential first-person character of the realization of practical rational capacities that acting is”. (p. 2)<sup>2</sup>

McDowell and I agree that coping requires involvement. We also presumably agree that, when one is involved in learning, problem solving, responding to coaching etc., one acts with deliberation and so one experiences oneself as a subject monitoring one's involved activity—that is, one is mindful of what one is doing. But McDowell believes that, even when I'm not paying attention to what I'm doing, the capacity to be self-aware must still be operative. As he puts it in his adaptation of Kant on the ubiquity of the “I think”: “in action there must always be an ‘I do’”. (p. 2)

But absorbed coping is not just another name for involved coping. It is involved coping at its best. Experts experience periods of performance, variously called “flow”, “in the groove” and “in the zone”, when everything becomes easier, confidence rises, time slows down, and the mind, which usually monitors performance, is quieted. Yet performance is at its peak. Something similar happens to each of us when any activity from taking a walk, to being absorbed in a conversation, to giving a lecture is going really well. That is, whenever we are successfully and effortlessly finding our way around in the world. Athletes in such situations say they are playing out of their heads, and in much of our everyday coping, so are we.

Sartre makes a convincing case that in such absorbed activity the ego is altogether absent and only emerges with reflection. As a good phenomenologist, he describes his own ego-less absorption:

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.<sup>3</sup>

In general, when one is totally absorbed in one's activity, one ceases to be a subject.

Sartre admits that when he reflects on his experience after the fact, he can't help remembering himself as its subject. In his memory of the experience there was an “I” trying to catch the streetcar. But he claims that

the absorbed experience leaves a trace of itself as it was prior to reflection—a trace that involves no ego. I'm happy to agree with McDowell that in attentive, deliberate or, as McDowell puts it, “immersed” action an ego is always involved. But in the case of coping at its best this description misses the phenomenon. In fully absorbed coping, there is no immersed ego, not even an implicit one. The coper does not need to be aware of himself even in some minimal way but only needs to be capable of entering a monitoring stance if the brain, which is comparing current performance with how things went in the past, sends an alarm signal that something is going wrong. Then one becomes attentive to one's performance and one is solicited by the situation to make appropriate adjustments.<sup>4</sup>

If the ego were always implicitly monitoring its coping, attending to what one was 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.<sup>5</sup> If the expert coper is to remain in flow and perform at his best, he must respond directly to solicitations without attending to his activity or to the objects doing the soliciting. There is no place in the phenomenology of fully absorbed coping for mindfulness. In flow, as Sartre sees, there are only attractive and repulsive forces drawing appropriate activity out of an active body.

But how can one describe coping without reference to a subject doing the coping? Homer already described this phenomenon. Whenever he describes his heroes at dinner, he could be translated as saying that “their arms shot out to the food lying ready before them”. Clearly, this does not seem to Homer to be a mere reflex nor to be a case of the warriors as agents reaching for their food. The same phenomenon appears in more sophisticated skills. I once heard a Grandmaster say that under extreme time pressure he sometimes finds his arm going out and making a move before he can take in the board position. And, indeed, all of us have hands and arms that are masters of everyday coping. Merleau-Ponty points out, for example, that, as we get up to leave the room, our hand is already taking account of the shape of the door handle.<sup>6</sup>

McDowell sensibly wants to avoid attributing intentionality to the body, but, when characterizing a response such as his Frisbee-catching woman's, he has only two possible accounts at his disposal: a meaninglessly bodily movement or an action done by a subject for a reason. But neither alternative seems to fit the phenomenon. In so far as a basic action like eating dinner or going for a walk is concerned, there will always be an “I” planning and initiating the overall action, but when we want to describe the activity that contributes to the basic action but is not itself a basic action, we find we don't experience an ego doing it.

Likewise on the side of the world, our way of taking account of the doorknob in using it to go out the door isn't itself such that, were I to attend to it (i.e. to the way of taking account of the doorknob while using it to go

out the door) I would find something seen as a doorknob. That is, I don't see the doorknob as a doorknob when I'm absorbed in using it, and the way I do take account of it in this case isn't just an implicit version of seeing it as a doorknob. Yet, my coping is mine in that I can break off doing it, and for that reason I take responsibility for it. Moreover, it is a directed response to the situation that can succeed or fail. Merleau-Ponty calls this kind of activity *motor intentionality*.

The example of how we take absorbed account of the doorknob without being mindful of it can, however, be misleading. It is an instance of how we find our way around in the world all right, but most of our coping is not even that directed. Merleau-Ponty points out that, as we find our way around in the world, we are most of the time being led to the right distance and best perspective from which to get a better grip on the things in our surroundings. Samuel Todes adds in *Body and World*,<sup>7</sup> that we not only have to face things to deal with them, but, as we do so, our body is led to balance itself in the gravitational field. According to Todes, in this and many other ways perception can be seen to be a skilled bodily accomplishment that goes on without an explicit or implicit sense of an "I" who is doing it.

If this is an accurate account of the phenomenon of bodily responsiveness to solicitations, what we find are not just affordances plus desires that give one a reason to respond to them. That is the traditional account of action, and of course, many of our actions do have this "I do" instrumental structure. But, as McDowell rightly sees, such an account of solicitations "would not amount to much" (p. 5). Distinguishing solicitations from affordances is only a big deal if one is trying to break out of the traditional understanding of independent minds relating to the world. Affordances such as the door affording going out are *independent* of our current interests and actions (although they are relative to our body-size and skills), but solicitations, like one's hand being drawn to take the form of the doorknob as one is about to go out, are inseparable from relative to our current activity.

The phenomenologist's question, then, is: How does responding to a solicitation differ from responding to an affordance? McDowell, no doubt noting our capacity for self-awareness in attentive action, has a general proposal:

We should not start with the assumption that mindedness, the characteristic in virtue of which I am the thinking thing I am, is alien to unreflective immersion in bodily life... [We should] let our conception of mindedness be controlled by the thought that mindedness is operative even in our unreflective perceiving and acting. (p. 5)

That is, even if in fully absorbed coping we don't experience ourselves as subjects but respond bodily to solicitations by exercising motor intentionality, given our mentalistic *capacities*, our absorbed coping must be pervaded by what McDowell names with the technical term, *mindedness*. But I 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*.

Such an argument would be an original and important contribution to our discussion. Otherwise, since in fully absorbed coping we simply don't experience ourselves as thinking things, mindedness looks like the lingering ghost of the mental.

### Conclusion

Of course, one can stipulatively redefine the traditional mentalistic terms any way one pleases but one can't at the same time claim one is overcoming traditional philosophy. To do that one would have to distinguish a situation-specific and a general form of conceptuality and mindedness, as McDowell does, *and* show how our capacity for detached abstract thought grows out of and presupposes our involved situation-specific activity.

If he did this, McDowell would come close to the existential phenomenologist's project of showing how situation-specific skills underlie and make possible our general and abstract mentalistic capacities. But that would still be to miss the way the phenomenon of fully absorbed coping is more pervasive than situation-specific involvement. Thus the existential phenomenologist would further want to show how, at the most basic level, our fully absorbed responses to solicitations operate in the background to underlie and support even our situation-specific concepts, and agential activity. But that would be to introduce a new version of the ground-floor/upper-story approach that I suggest we should pursue and that McDowell rejects as a relic of foundationalism.

McDowell clearly sums up the issue dividing us:

On the view I am urging, the point is not, as Dreyfus has it, that our embodied coping skills are independent of any openness in which rationality figures—a ground-floor level, supporting a distinct upper story at which openness involves rationality. If that were right, it would follow that our embodied coping skills cannot themselves be permeated with conceptual mindedness. But that is not the right interpretation for the thought that openness to affordances is basic. (p. 13)

I hope readers in deciding which interpretation is right, will ask themselves whether our egoless, non-conceptual absorbed coping might well be the background on the basis of which conceptual mindedness is possible. To

avoid any suggestion of an indubitable ground-floor from which other phenomena are derived, we could, following Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, call this a *horizontal* rather than a ground-floor/upper-story dependency relation.

## Notes

1. Heidegger would hold that neither we nor the cat in McDowell's example normally experience the opening in a barrier as an opening. We just go through it. Yet Heidegger does say that, unlike animals, we always cope with being as beings. [Martin Heidegger (1995) *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (Trans.) W. McNeil & N. Walker, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press) 269.] That is an ontological claim that tells us that in absorbed coping we always cope with entities that are interrelated and ultimately connect up with our understanding of being. But it is not a phenomenological claim. Indeed, when speaking of the experience of going in and out, Heidegger reminds us that we just respond to the solicitation:

[W]hat is first of all "given" ... is the "for writing," the "for going in and out," ... "for sitting". That is, writing, going-in-and-out, sitting, and the like are what we are a priori involved with. What we know when we "know our way around".

Martin Heidegger (1976) *Logik: Die Frage nach der Wahrheit, Gesamtausgabe* (Trans.) Thomas Sheehan, Band 21 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann) 144.

2. For Merleau-Ponty the first person character of experience needn't mean that there must be a subject having the experience. True, the world is always experienced from a point of view, but, as Merleau-Ponty says, "my body is my point of view on the world". Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception* (Trans.) Colin Smith, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul) 70. What Merleau-Ponty is trying to say is: "My lived body is the world from my point of view."
3. Jean-Paul Sartre (1957) *The Transcendence of the Ego* (New York: Noonday Press, Inc.) 48, 49.
4. Here, I think, McDowell may have Heidegger on his side. When, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger speaks of everyday on-going coping he speaks of "a cognizance of itself such as accompanies all Dasein's way of behaving". Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Trans.) J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 439. I'm siding with Merleau-Ponty and current neurological models of skilled action, (such as actor-critic reinforcement learning models), which claim that consciousness is only called into action once the brain has detected something going wrong.
5. I'm convinced by McDowell's account of how a certain kind of misguided reflection understood as the attempt to turn subsidiary movements into basic actions could account for Knoblauch's dramatically disorganized behavior. But what still concerns me is that normal forms of monitoring one's coping, even awareness that things are going well, are sufficient to break the flow and so produce inferior performance.
6. See Sean Kelly (2000) "Grasping at Straws: Motor Intentionality and the Cognitive Science of Skillful Action" in Mark Wrathall, Jeff Malpas (Eds.) *Heidegger, Coping and Cognitive Science: Essays in Honor of Hubert Dreyfus Vol. II*, (Cambridge: MIT Press).
7. See Samuel Todes (2001) *Body and World* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press).