

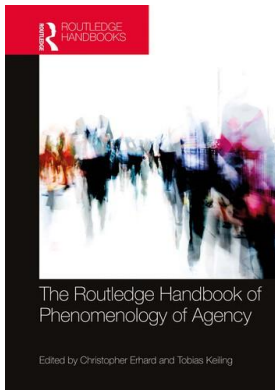
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Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Agency

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Hubert Dreyfus

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315104249-19>

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Published online on: 30 Oct 2020

How to cite :- Justin F. White. 30 Oct 2020, *Hubert Dreyfus from: The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Agency* Routledge

Accessed on: 20 Mar 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315104249-19>

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HUBERT DREYFUS

Skillful coping and the nature
of everyday expertise*Justin F. White***Introduction**

Hubert Dreyfus's work in the phenomenology of agency is distinctive for the privileged and central position he gives to our ability to navigate the everyday world. Drawing on the existential-phenomenological tradition—particularly the work of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty—Dreyfus characterizes skillful embodied engagement with the world (skillful coping) as the paradigmatic instance of human intelligence and agency. He uses the notion of skillful coping to push against the emphasis on deliberation he finds in the traditional view of human agency, in which an intention to perform some action is formed as the result of deliberation involving desires and beliefs about how to best satisfy those desires. As he sees it, the traditional view relies on an overly intellectualized conception of humans, leading to an overly intellectual conception of action. Instead of starting with a highly intellectual and deliberative conception of the human mind and then working to understand how that mind leads to action, Dreyfus takes skillful coping—what we do when we carry on conversations, drive cars, write papers, dribble basketballs, and chop onions—as paradigmatic of human agency and seeks to understand the type of mind involved. If skillful coping—also described as absorbed, immediate, everyday, and embodied—is “simultaneously the highest and most basic form of engagement with the world” (Wrathall 2014: 4), there are various implications for the nature of human action and intelligence.¹

One of Dreyfus's central claims is that the complex understanding involved in skillfully performing apparently ordinary tasks need not be highly reflective. Indeed, Dreyfus thinks, the fluid coping distinctive of expert performance is often marked by a lack of deliberation and even a lack of conscious awareness of the process in which she is involved (Dreyfus 2014: 34). Highly deliberative action is not a sign of expertise, but of its lack. The expert driver no longer needs to deliberate about when to shift gears or change lanes and instead fluidly responds to the feel of the engine (with changing gears) and to the flow of traffic (with shifting lanes). Dreyfus claims that the same is true of experts in paradigmatically intellectually demanding pursuits—such as playing chess, performing Liszt's “La Campanella,” interpreting complex scientific results, and crafting detailed furniture. What is distinctive of these experts is less their complex mental representations or virtuosity in deliberation than it is their ability to respond to the highly particularized significances or affordances of a concrete

situation. Dreyfus connects the ability to respond to the particular significances of a concrete situation with typically existential concerns, such as authenticity. On his reading of *Being and Time*, the practical world is articulated for the authentic individual with fine-grained particularities not apparent to the inauthentic individual. The authentic individual thus can more skillfully navigate the world of practical concern by responding to the fine-grained and precise particularities she encounters than is possible for the inauthentic individual who finds herself in a situation articulated in terms of general features. The way Dreyfus connects skillful coping with authenticity exemplifies his syncretic approach in which he synthesizes and, arguably, extends the work of thinkers such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

It is through his engagement with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty that Dreyfus develops his account of skillful coping as a critique of the philosophical tradition, which he sees as intellectualistic and deliberative in a way that distorts our understanding of human existence. This chapter is organized around key themes in the account of skillful coping he contrasts with the traditional view of human intelligence and agency: the relationship between mind and body (and mind and world) and the importance and the nature of the context of human existence, the nature of learning and skill development, the relationship between flow, deliberation, and what the engaged agent perceives, as well the relationship between expertise and authenticity.

The concluding section examines one worry about Dreyfus's characterization of expertise within the skillful coping paradigm, particularly in light of his emphasis of the non-deliberative nature of skillful coping. Specifically, does Dreyfus's rejection of the tradition's emphasis on deliberation lead him to excessively minimize the role of deliberation as one develops and expands expertise? That is, how can one reconcile the skillful, absorbed coping Dreyfus emphasizes with the process of deliberately and intentionally learning new skills or of extending the realm in which one can skillfully cope? Dreyfus's emphasis of the non-deliberative nature of skillful coping could seem to problematically push deliberative practice out of the picture. My suggestion is that there is space for such deliberate learning and skill development for experts within the framework Dreyfus proposes. To flesh out the place of deliberate learning, I draw, appropriately, on both Dreyfus and Merleau-Ponty to suggest how intentionally (and deliberately) trying to live in a certain way—whether acquiring new skills or expanding or refining one's practical framework—is not at odds with but is ultimately crucial for the expertise Dreyfus has in mind, that of absorbed, fluid, and skillful coping in a practical world.

A note on historical influences

As noted earlier, Dreyfus's views on skillful coping often arise through his engagement with key figures in the existentialist tradition and, perhaps to a fault, he typically credits his insights to these philosophers. As Mark Wrathall (2014: 2) puts it, "In his published works, Dreyfus tends (rather too modestly, in my opinion) to attribute his insights to other philosophers—primarily Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty." His tendency to attribute insights to others and the extent to which the version of Heidegger received in Anglo-American analytic philosophy is Dreyfus's Heidegger has led some to use the term "Dreidegger" to refer to the fusion of Dreyfus and Heidegger, a fusion some think distorts Heidegger's views (see Kelly 2005: 15). The same could perhaps be said of his interpretation of Merleau-Ponty and others. That said, Dreyfus's engagement with these figures, and the subsequent work of his students, has played an important role in the now flourishing scholarship on Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

But whether Dreyfus is primarily interpreting these figures, finding support for his views in them, or some combination of the two, Dreyfus's views are often presented as readings of Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty and as criticisms of what he sees to be the prevailing (and mistaken) philosophical views—whether the views are Edmund Husserl's, John Searle's, or John McDowell's. Through his reading of Heidegger, Dreyfus finds, for example, emphasis on practice over reflection (with more deliberative thought coming to the fore primarily in cases of practical breakdown) and on the way in which our human purposes shape the practical context, in addition to an account of the holistic nature of significance. In Merleau-Ponty, he finds, among other things, an emphasis on the thoroughly embodied nature of perception and action, as well as the notion of maximal grip, which he uses to show how one can attend to the particularities of a situation without robust (or perhaps any) conceptual representation. More broadly, it is through his engagement with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty that Dreyfus develops his account of skillful coping.

Skillful coping

Dreyfus thinks the philosophical tradition as a whole has long relied on an overly intellectualized account of human existence. By focusing on deliberative rationality as what is distinctive of human agency, we either overlook or distort the skillful but not always intellectual way we navigate the world. By focusing on the ubiquitous phenomenon of skillful coping, Dreyfus aims to understand the nature of human existence on its own terms rather than starting with some prior theoretical commitment—such as the assumption that humans are distinctive for a highly conceptual and intellectualized rationality—and then trying to fit human existence into a framework provided by that commitment. He thinks that careful analysis of everyday skillful actions yields a rich view of what is distinctive of human existence, including human intelligence and agency.

Indeed, he thinks that typical conceptions of human intelligence and agency arise from analyzing human existence that has stalled. It is as if we have attempted to understand the nature of a functioning car engine by lifting up the hood on a car that has broken down, instead of looking at a functioning engine. Rather than illuminating human existence in action, we end up making claims about the nature of human existence when it is not functioning smoothly because something has gone wrong.

In his descriptions of the skillful activity of experts, activities such as chess and athletic expertise figure prominently, but he also attributes robust expertise to everyday skills such as driving a car, understanding and speaking a language, and knowing how close to stand to others in a conversation. Looking carefully at the phenomenon of expertise—or engaged skillful coping—will illuminate key features of Dreyfus's account of agency.

One prominent element of Dreyfus's account is the idea that our everyday being-in-the-world is typically unreflective and nonconceptual, even if our intellectual, conceptual capacities offer us unique possibilities. As he puts it: “What makes us special, then, isn't that, unlike animals, we can respond directly to the conceptual structure of our environment; it's that, unlike animals, we can transform our unthinking non conceptual engagement, and thereby encounter new, thinkable structures” (Dreyfus 2014: 123). On Dreyfus's account, these “conceptual structures are not implicit in our involved experience any more than reasons for our actions are implicit in our expert coping, or than the detached attitude is implicit in the engaged one” (123). Our uniqueness depends instead on our ability to step back from our everyday “unthinking non conceptual engagement” with the world and think of it abstractly.

But even if the capacity to step back from our everyday engagement with the world, to become reflectively self-aware, is crucial to our uniqueness as persons, it is relatively uncontroversial to claim that we are not always reflectively self-aware, especially with regard to the processes guiding our actions. However, imperfect reflectively self-awareness can be compatible with the traditional picture: one could hold that the conceptual structures and deliberative processes are at play; we are simply not fully aware of them. On the traditional view, the expert has a more robust mental representation than the non-expert and more effectively deliberates about the considerations involved in the various relevant scenarios. Dreyfus, however, pushes back by suggesting that reading mental representation or unnoticed deliberation into expertise derives more from a commitment to the deliberative paradigm of human action than from careful attention to the nature of expertise.²

Although in this piece I typically adopt Dreyfus's characterizations of notions such as concept, representation, reflectiveness, and deliberation, it should be noted that his characterizations of these and associated notions and his related criticisms of what he calls "the traditional picture" are controversial and lie at the heart of many criticisms of Dreyfus's views. For example, the way Dreyfus (2007) equates "direct and unreflective" with "nonconceptual and nonminded" lies at the heart of his debates with Searle and McDowell.³ It is also one of Sacha Golob's (2014) key points in his criticisms of the dominant work on Heidegger, work exemplified by Dreyfus and those influenced by him, such as Mark Wrathall and Taylor Carman. People like Searle, McDowell, and Golob criticize Dreyfus for relying on an overly intellectualistic and detached notion of concepts and representations, while Dreyfus consistently presses that the nature of skillful coping is nonconceptual and need not involve the representational content involved in what he sees as the traditional view. For one example, in "What Is Conceptually Articulated Understanding," Joseph Rouse (2013) develops the distinction between descriptive and normative accounts of conceptually articulated content in order to pinpoint the disagreement (or sometimes, lack of disagreement) between Dreyfus and those he criticizes (and who criticize him). On a descriptive account of conceptually articulated content, conceptual content is "something actually present or operative in specific performances by concept users" (Rouse 2013: 250). Normative accounts, by contrast, "identify the conceptual domain with those performances and capacities that are appropriately assessed according to rational norms" (2013: 250). Dreyfus's views could challenge the descriptive account but not the normative account (2013: 252).

Because an adequate analysis of these issues would require (indeed, has required!) a chapter or book of its own, suffice it to say that the debate about the precise nature of concepts, representational content, mindedness, and the like, as well as their respective places in human existence—particularly when it comes to skillful, embodied coping—has been lively and is ongoing. In this chapter, when I refer to concepts, conceptuality, representations, representational, and the like, I typically adopt Dreyfus's usage and, temporarily, bracket questions of whether his understanding of those notions is justified either philosophically or as an interpretation of historical figures such as Heidegger. Let us turn now to Dreyfus's account of skillful coping and to what he thinks we can learn about human existence through careful attention to skillful coping.

Being-in-the-world, mind and world, and context

Dreyfus thinks a careful analysis of skillful coping reveals an agent intertwined with the world in a way that undermines the common divide between mind and world. For one, Dreyfus thinks the "mind" in the mind/world distinction is too narrow to capture the way

an agent relates to the world: the entity relating to the world is the whole human being and not just the mind. We are embodied beings and our bodies not only tie us inextricably with the world but shape the way we perceive and engage with the world. But Dreyfus suggests further that thinking of it as a “‘relation’ [between mind and world] is misleading, since it suggests the coming together of two separate entities—human being and world—whereas . . . mind and world [are] inseparable” (Dreyfus 2014: 170). Put another way, “[in] our most basic way of being—i.e. as skillful copers—we are not minds at all but one with the world” (Dreyfus 2014: 259). Dreyfus draws on Heidegger’s notion of being-in-the-world to explain the unitary nature of human existence, in which we find a human agent always already enmeshed in a practically significant world. The world solicits her to act in particular ways depending on her aims or practical commitments. The embodied copers responds directly to the affordances in the world—“food affords eating, doors afford going in and out, floors afford walking on” (Dreyfus 2014: 116).⁴ When looking for something to chop onions, the chef’s knife on the counter shows up as “for chopping,” but if clearing kitchen clutter, the same knife could show up as “to be put away.”

On this picture, the grounds for what we do lie with the world as much as the agent. The natures of knives and onions, say, play crucial roles in the way we use them. Dreyfus (2014: 95) uses the example of the difference between dribbling a basketball and a mime trying to mimic the act of dribbling. The act of dribbling is grounded by the contours of the basketball, the give of the basketball, and the amount of bounce of the surface (to say nothing of the particular details in an actual game) in a way that requires a sensitivity to the specificity of the situation that even the most skilled mime cannot re-create. For example, the ball makes an impression on my skin when it bounces up and creates friction that cannot be reproduced without the actual ball.⁵ The extent of the world’s influence becomes clearer if we consider the bounce of different surfaces (asphalt, sidewalk, or hardwood), whether the surface is level or slanted, the way temperature affects the ball’s springiness and my dexterity, and so forth.

Within the holistic conception of agency Dreyfus proposes, my whole self is involved in agency and the contours of agency depend on a larger whole. In short, the human agent is more than a mind and the agent is intertwined with the world. The way the world appears depends on my aims, skills, and dispositions, and the way I press into possibilities depends on subtle features of the world. In contrast to the traditional account of human action, which assumes “a clear distinction can be drawn between an agent and the world within which the agent acts” (Wrathall 2014: 2), Dreyfus’s account proposes that agent and world are inextricably intertwined in a relationship with porous boundaries.

One reason for the intertwining is that the world, as we primarily experience it, depends on agential involvement—on aims, concerns, commitments, and cares. Even at the level of perception, we first see the world in terms of affordances. When we are tired on a hike or arriving late to a lecture, we are more likely to see the world primarily in terms of whether it affords sitting—to take a rest when hiking or to find a spot in the crowded lecture hall. But conversely, the shape of our aims, concerns, and commitments also depends on the stuff we find around us. The roles and pursuits available, and the forms they take, depend on a broader context. In some cases, the dependence of roles on context is obvious: becoming a computer scientist wasn’t an option for someone living in 14th-century London. But the dependence relation can be less obvious: does it mean something different to be a parent or spouse than it did a few centuries (perhaps even a few decades) ago? Although we have a hand in determining the type of parent or spouse we will be, the shapes of these identities are not (entirely) up to us. These identities or, on Dreyfus’s reading of Heidegger, “for-the-sake-of-whichs” depend on other agents. But even if the way the world appears depends on

having some for-the-sake-of-which, Dreyfus insists that engagement with the world need not be conceptual or reflective.⁶ Skillfully coping as a parent does not depend on consciously thinking of oneself as a parent. When I skillfully cope in the world, I can see or feel what the situation calls for, or affords, and respond effectively without representing my goal to myself and without the situation being conceptually articulated. Of course, the environment and what it calls for depend on my roles, identities, and dispositions. But even if those give me a foothold in the world, I need not consciously think of myself in terms of those features of my existence.⁷ In fact, for Dreyfus, consciously thinking of myself as a parent (or reflective self-awareness) is a sign that my engagement with the world has come up short. It is when I don't know how to respond in a situation that I stop and ask, "As a parent, what should I do here?" There are two key points here: (1) the affordances we perceive in our practical engagement with the world depend on our roles and identities, but (2) the nature of these affordances and our experiences that make them possible need not be conceptually rich.

The nature of affordances offers a way to understand how what is given can be meaningful but free of concepts (2014: 116). The world can be meaningfully structured for agents without the presence of concepts. In skillful coping, one responds to the particularities of a situation without the mediation of representation or concepts: "skillful coping does not require a mental representation of its goal at all. It can be purposive without the agent entertaining a purpose" (Dreyfus 2014: 84). But if skillful coping need not involve concepts or representation, what does it require? And what distinguishes experts from less-skilled performers, if it is not a richer conceptual framework and the ability to act on that framework?

Rules, skill acquisition, and expertise

Hubert Dreyfus and his brother Stuart tackle this question in their analysis of skill acquisition and expert performance. They start with the novice and then move to advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, and expertise. The early stages of skill acquisition (novice and advanced beginner) are characterized by (often painfully) conscious rule-following and careful deliberation about the best action to pursue. The learning driver learns the appropriate distance (in terms of some unit of measurement) to maintain between her car and other vehicles; the beginning chess player learns context-free values of the various pieces and generic strategies to develop certain pieces first and, perhaps, to castle by the sixth move. At the level of competence, things start to change. The competent performer consciously chooses "a plan, goal, or perspective which organizes the situation" (Dreyfus 2014: 32). The particular plan or goal chosen determines the contours of the practical situation, making different elements stand "out as more or less important with respect to the plan, while other irrelevant elements are forgotten" (2014: 32). If one chooses to aggressively attack the opponent's king, for example, the board and pieces will appear in light of that goal. Opportunities to advance her queen or rooks, or to fork, could stand out, as could obstacles to her plan.

With a lot of experience, she may transition from competence to proficiency, coming to spontaneously see multiple possibilities in a situation. Instead of consciously choosing a plan (as a competent performer does), she intuitively sees what a situation requires. The proficient chess player can read the board and know that she should attack her opponent's king, even if she then needs to deliberate about the best method of attack. As one progresses from proficiency to expertise, she spontaneously sees not only what a situation calls for her to do—say, attack the king—but also the best (or at least better) ways to do it. The situation could also call for action that defies the generic rules she initially learned—for example, to sacrifice a piece of value for positional advantage. However, the expert can see what to do without conscious awareness of why that path

stands out. And it is not that the expert is simply unaware of the rules underlying her decision process. Instead, through vast experience, the expert has great situational understanding that is not grounded in (and is not reducible to) rules. In the early stages of skill acquisition, she relied on rules. But not only does she no longer rely on those rules, but her situational understanding “def[ies] complete verbal description” (2014: 35).⁸ The brothers Dreyfus suggest that the expert’s reliance more on pattern recognition than on an advanced understanding of rules explains why early attempts to develop computers with genuine chess expertise had fallen short of master level chess playing. These computers were programmed with the rules of chess, and with strategy rules offered by expert chess players (2014: 38). But if the Dreyfus account is right, the focus on rules explains why early programs were marginally competent by normal chess standards.⁹ In contrast to the traditional account according to which the expert better understands and incorporates relevant rules into her actions, the Dreyfuses claim not only that the expert is unaware of the rules guiding her actions, but that rules no longer underlie her actions. They refer approvingly to Euthyphro’s refusal to give a rule-based account of piety and his focus on examples of piety. For the expert, this refusal is more than mere refusal; an expert’s understanding is distorted if reduced to rules, however complex or intricate. The expert started with rules and could learn new rules along the way, but her expertise is not reducible to rules.¹⁰

As Wrathall concludes from Dreyfus’s analysis, “The phenomenology of skill acquisition . . . shows that agents who possess different levels of skill are, in a very real sense, engaged in different kinds of activities” (Wrathall 2014: 4). On the traditional model of skill acquisition, the same rules govern the actions of the beginner and the expert alike—the expert simply has a better understanding of the relevant rules and is better able to apply them in new situations (Wrathall 2014: 6). On Dreyfus’s account of skill acquisition, however, the expert no longer applies rules, but instead recognizes and responds to highly particularized situations (see Dreyfus 2014: 34–43). Thus, Dreyfus thinks, “the basis of expert coping may well be the sort of features that the expert could not be aware of and would not be able to think” (2014: 120). While skillfully coping, the expert responds to felt tensions in the practical gestalt, an ability that depends on highly particularized motor skills but need not involve a rich conceptual repertoire (see Dreyfus 2014: 81, 150–152). The possibility that experts could be unaware of the features they are responding to could help explain why interviews with expert performers about their performances can be disappointing. If we expect answers that show a complex understanding of advanced rules, it can be a letdown experts offer up the same rules that a beginner would, apparently falling back on clichés: “If one asks the experts for rules one will, in effect, force the expert to regress to the level of a beginner and state the rules he still remembers but no longer uses” (Dreyfus 2014: 36). So even if their answers are sophisticated, there is reason to be suspicious whether their description accurately captures what was going on. Because expertise is not rule based,

when an expert is forced to give the reasons that led to the action, his account will necessarily be a retroactive rationalization that shows at best that the expert can retrieve from memory the general principles and tactical rules he once followed as a competent performer.

(2014: 113)

Flow, deliberation, and agential perception

By taking the fluid action of such expert performers as paradigmatic of human action and intelligence, Dreyfus pushes against the deliberative approach to action. Because flow is

characterized not by deliberation “but by the withdrawal of deliberative activity,” the expert is not demurring or avoiding giving a genuine answer when she describes her performance with basic rules that seem inadequate to the complexity and sophistication of her actions (Wrathall 2014: 3). When in the midst of peak performance, she is not rapidly deliberating among rules—simple or complex—and so any attempt to recapture what she was doing in deliberative terms is destined to disappoint. However, her failure to articulate (or even to be guided by) complex rules is only a failure if we are antecedently committed to the paradigm of deliberative action, a paradigm prone to read deliberation into what is better understood as skillful but spontaneous action (see Dreyfus 2014: 191). On Dreyfus’s picture, deliberation about what to do and about what rules to follow is a sign of the limits of one’s expertise:

When a master has to deliberate in chess or in any skill domain, it’s because there has been some sort of disturbance that has disrupted his intuitive response. Perhaps the situation is so unusual that no immediate response is called forth. Or several responses are solicited with equal pull.

(Dreyfus 2014: 118)

But if the expert performer in flow does not deliberate, it could seem that it turns expert action into something that is merely instinctual or a matter of reflex. And Dreyfus thinks there is something similar to instinctive or reflexive behavior, but it also involves what he calls primordial intentionality or purposiveness. When Dreyfus says above that humans can relate to the world in purposive ways without entertaining a purpose, he means they need not represent to themselves the state of affairs they are aiming to achieve or even what they are doing when they perform the action.¹¹ We can find ourselves arriving to the office after commuting on “autopilot,” for example, without representing to ourselves the end of arriving at the office or the specific route we are taking. What Dreyfus’s characterization of primordial intentionality and the way it pervades much of our daily lives suggests, however, is that some instances of “autopilot” are more sophisticated than they might first appear. The master chess player and the expert tennis player need not represent their goals to themselves when playing chess or tennis, respectively. Searle replies that in such cases, some broad intentional action is represented—the tennis player wants to win the point or the chess master wants to checkmate the opponent (or put pressure on the opponent’s king) (Dreyfus 2014: 85). Under this represented intention, Searle thinks, the expert need not form fine-grained intentions to, say, turn her racket to a specific angle or to advance her bishop in a certain way.

Dreyfus admits that there is something right in Searle’s response that the action is intentional (and represented to the agent) on some level, but he worries that the broad intention Searle describes overlooks the fine-grained nature of what the expert is doing. In trying to win a point, she could also rush the net, hit a cross-court backhand or slice the ball at a specific angle, and so on. And it is even more fine-grained than that. The novice and the expert could both be aware of different sequences that could win a point. They could even state rules about how to hold a racket in order to get a certain spin on the ball. But when the expert tries to win a point, she responds to the subtle situational forces at play by hitting the ball with a specific kind of spin, by hitting it sharply instead of slightly cross-court, and so forth. She intentionally does these things, but they happen too quickly for deliberation or conscious representation. As David Foster Wallace puts it in an essay on Roger Federer:

The upshot is that pro tennis involves intervals of time too brief for deliberate action. Temporally, we’re more in the operative range of reflexes, purely physical reactions that

bypass conscious thought. And yet an effective return of serve depends on a large set of decisions and physical adjustments that are a whole lot more involved and intentional than blinking, jumping when startled, etc.

(Wallace 2012: 23)

The expert's skillful response to the situation is not reducible to rules, but it is not mere reflex either.¹² As motor intentionality, it is intentional but without propositional success conditions (Dreyfus 2014: 94).

So how, exactly, does the expert experience the world she navigates? On Dreyfus's account, the agent initially experiences the world in terms of affordances (as "for-whats," not "whats"), as "for sitting" (chairs) and "for writing" (pens) (Dreyfus 2014: 255). Because expertise involves coming to see (or perhaps feel) the affordances of a situation and developing the skills necessary to respond well, one could skillfully respond to a situation without consciously representing some aim or intention. One who is very familiar with an activity or situation and has trained until skilled responses are a matter of muscle memory can see what the situation invites, or feel the tension in the current practical gestalt, and respond in a skillful way without being consciously aware of what one sees, why one feels the tension, or of the precise way one is responding. Dreyfus uses the example of instructor pilots to support his point:

Instructor pilots teach beginning pilots a rule for determining the order in which to scan their instruments—a rule the instructor pilots were taught and, as far as they know, still use. At one point, however, Air Force psychologists studied the eye movements of the instructors during simulated flight and found, to everyone's surprise, that the instructor pilots were not following the rule they were teaching; in fact, their eye movements varied from situation to situation and did not seem to follow any rule at all. The instructor pilots had no idea of the way they were scanning their instruments and so could not have represented to themselves what they were doing.

(Dreyfus 2014: 85)

The expert pilots were unaware of the way they varied the order in which they scanned their instruments depending on the situation. With many hours of training, they had moved beyond the rules they were taught—and that they continued to teach—but they were unaware that they had done so and were thus unable to articulate new rules in their place. And more, given the situational-dependent nature of their actions, there did not seem to be any articulable rule guiding their actions. The expert, then, sees the affordances of the situation and responds well without being fully aware of the nuances of what she is doing. Mastery, on this picture, "requires a rich perceptual repertoire—the ability to respond to subtle differences in the appearance of perhaps hundreds of thousands of situations—but it requires no conceptual repertoire at all" (Dreyfus 2014: 119). Dreyfus follows J.J. Gibson in claiming that our "pickup of affordances as high-order invariants in the optic array, and neural net considerations as to how the brain might detect such invariants, suggest that expertise does not require concepts" (2014: 119). Extensive training and experience allow experts to perceive and skillfully respond to affordances of which they may not be consciously aware.

Expertise and authenticity

As mentioned earlier, one distinctive element of Dreyfus's account of expertise is the way he interweaves his account of skillful coping with existential themes such as authenticity.

Drawing on the notion of leveling in Heidegger's discussion of *das Man* and inauthenticity in *Being and Time*, Dreyfus claims that when an individual becomes authentic (taking ownership for herself), the world of her practical engagement can appear in its fine-grained particularities and not merely as a general situation. The situation of the authentic agent reveals itself to her in its concrete specificity and not as some generic context. In Heidegger's discussion of *das Man* (sometimes left untranslated or, if translated, typically translated as "the one" or "the they"), Dreyfus finds a description of what a general, rule-based understanding of a situation would be. Unlike the expert who sees the particularities of the situation in ways that cannot be captured by rules or general characterizations, the understanding of *das Man* is not sensitive to the concrete particularities of the situation. By taking ownership of herself, the expert no longer depends on the general rules of *das Man* and, instead, comes to see and respond to the situation in its specificity.

Describing ethical expertise, Dreyfus writes,

Caring in its purest form is not ordinary loving; it is doing spontaneously whatever the situation demands. As we have seen, even if two situations were identical in every respect, two ethical experts with different histories would not necessarily respond in the same way. Each person must simply respond as well as he or she can to each unique situation with nothing but experience-based intuition as guide. Heidegger captures this ethical skill in his notion of authentic care as a response to the unique, as opposed to the general, situation [*Being and Time*, 346].

(Dreyfus 2014: 199)

These claims about ethical expertise are representative of claims about expertise in other arenas. In some cases, authenticity and expertise are so intertwined that it can be hard to disentangle the order of priority. For example, one can only be a radical innovator, or a world disclosing master (which Dreyfus characterizes as the highest level of skillful activity), when one moves beyond conformity with received practices and, instead, opens up new possibilities for ways of being and novel ways to take up inherited practices in some activity. For example, when Dick Fosbury introduced what is now known as the "Fosbury flop" at the 1968 Olympic Games, he revolutionized the high jump. Although Fosbury's new approach also led him to be successful to typical standards—he did, after all, win the gold medal—world disclosure may depart from typical standards of excellence. But world disclosure reveals that we, as humans, are essentially world disclosers, disclosing new ways of being.

The richness and influence of Dreyfus's work likely stems in part from the way he draws on and makes connections between different (sometimes apparently disparate) thinkers and traditions. However, even if this syncretic approach is often a virtue, it is not without its worries. Despite the creativity of the resulting views, it is not always clear that the pieces fit together as seamlessly as Dreyfus suggests. For example, does the connection between the existentialist notion of authenticity and skillful, expert coping work the way Dreyfus proposes? One way to explain this connection is to see the transition to expertise happening as a proficient performer recognizes the inadequacy of rules to the complexity and specificity of the practical situations that arise in skillful coping—whether playing chess, flying jets, or performing surgery. This recognition could lead her to take responsibility for her absorbed coping in a way that allows her to move beyond the rules she initially learned and instead attend to the particularities of the situation. This is only a sketch and thus is underdeveloped, but one could worry that even though self-ownership and acting for one's own reasons are

crucial to Heidegger's account of authenticity, it is unclear if the skillful coping in Dreyfus's picture can do the existential heavy lifting associated with Heidegger's notion of authenticity and its entanglement with anxiety, facing one's death, and the like.

Skillful coping and the ongoing pursuit of expertise

In what remains, we will examine the process of learning new skills and expanding one's expertise, in light of Dreyfus's conception of expertise as the ability to continue in absorbed coping. As we have seen, Dreyfus goes to great lengths to minimize the role of concepts, representation, and deliberation in expertise and skillful coping. Sometimes he even suggests a different standard of expertise. Expertise is typically thought to involve excellence or success in some activity—consistently winning tennis or chess matches, for example. By contrast, Dreyfus (2000) proposes that being an expert does not always mean that one is very good at the relevant activity—whether chess, tennis, driving, or carrying on a conversation. On Dreyfus's account, someone who learns tennis by chopping at the ball and never learns a forehand stroke can become an expert tennis player insofar as she can continue to respond intuitively with the best possible chop. On the standard story, expertise is determined with reference to the aim of achieving success in the standard sense—say, winning the point or the match; on Dreyfus's conception, however, the aim according to which one is an expert is that of “ongoing coping as an end in itself” (Dreyfus 2014: 245 n24). For Dreyfus, expertise involves fluidly coping without pausing to act deliberately, even if that fluid coping sometimes falls short of success in the standard sense.

There is something attractive in Dreyfus's expansive understanding of expertise, expertise as maintaining one's comportment without needing to pause to deliberate about what to do. For example, persisting in some activity despite apparent limitations (such as the lack of a forehand) could allow one to develop novel responses to a range of situations in order to allow fluid coping to continue. The chopping tennis player will likely expand the range of situations in which one could chop. However, there is also something potentially restrictive in Dreyfus's expansiveness.

We find ourselves in a sort of dilemma. If the aim of expertise is ongoing coping (without pausing to deliberate) as an end in itself, the expert could develop novel approaches in one's current paradigm in order to maintain fluid coping. The chopper could find innovative ways to chop in a tennis match, for example. The worry in this direction, however, is that while the novel approaches developed by the chopping tennis player may allow her to continue to play tennis fluidly without pausing to deliberate, the novel approaches she develops may be less attentive and well-suited to the particularities of the situation. In the other direction, however, although expanding one's skills would likely allow one to respond more effectively to a wider range of situations that arise in the context of a tennis match, Dreyfus is right that learning new skills and new ways to do things will likely disrupt fluid coping—learning a forehand or learning to dribble with one's left hand can be slow, deliberate processes involving far-from-fluid coping. Over time and with lots of practice, new skills can become part of one's absorbed coping, thus expanding the range of situations in which one can fluidly cope. But there would be a period in which one's performance falls short of the aim of ongoing coping. Dreyfus's explanation is that when learning new skills, the expert's behavior is not that of an expert: “When we are following the advice of a coach, for example, our behavior regresses to mere competence. It is only after much practice, and after abandoning monitoring and letting ourselves be drawn back into full involvement in our activity, that we can

regain our expertise. The resulting expert coping returns to being direct and unreflective, which I take to be the same as being nonconceptual and nonminded” (Dreyfus 2007: 355). Expertise thus seems to be incompatible with a certain kind of deliberate learning.

If Dreyfus’s aim is to shift the understanding of expertise away from success in an activity and toward ongoing coping, the resulting picture is more than unintuitive. In order to avoid the deliberative element of skill acquisition, Dreyfus’s account could problematically devalue the learning process. My worry is less about Dreyfus’s expanding expertise to include the chopper than it is about the risk of mischaracterizing the person who pauses and deliberately reinvents herself in her pursuit of ever greater expertise. Although Dreyfus is surely right that one who continues to chop at the ball (and thus maintains fluid coping) instead of mastering a forehand may reveal new chopping possibilities in tennis, insofar as she seeks to continue to exist as an expert, that individual is also restricted to the chopping paradigm. One who takes the time to learn a forehand may experience less-than-fluid coping for a time, but it is in the interest of ever great fluid coping possibilities.

Dreyfus uses Bill Russell as an example of someone who exhibits the fluid coping of expert performance (see Dreyfus and Kelly 2011). Russell could skillfully cope in an apparently endless array of situations. And when he was in the zone, he was less worried about who won the game than about maintaining the magic of the situation (Russell and Branch 1979: 157; Wrathall and Londen 2017). But here Dreyfus seems to be helping himself to Russell’s expertise in the standard sense. If we compare the chopping tennis player to Russell, Russell’s ability to skillfully cope in a variety of situations and respond fluidly to what the situation invites is the result of extensive training and skill, in sharp contrast to the chopping tennis player’s relatively limited ability to play tennis. There is something worrisome if, as Wrathall and Londen suggest in their characterization of Dreyfus, the aim of maintaining the fluidity of the comportment “would be undermined were she to play a forehand shot because, never having mastered the forehand, this would force her to act deliberately, and draw her away from her optimal gestalt” (2017, MS). Admittedly, there is something appealing, even beautiful, in the focus on fluid action and the way in which our expertise extends to all sorts of mundane activities. But expertise that avoids deliberation can also be stunting. To be sure, adding an effective forehand to one’s repertoire likely requires (perhaps painful) learning and unlearning, writing and rewriting muscle memory through intensive training and practice. But it also, in time, allows for the phronesis and world-disclosive mastery that Dreyfus emphasizes.¹³ Unless supplemented with typical standards of skill, Dreyfus’s alternate and expansive notion of expertise ultimately can limit one’s ability to fluidly cope in a way that is genuinely sensitive to the affordances of the concrete situation.

The other side of Dreyfus’s emphasis on absorbed, skillful coping is the way he downplays the importance of conscious, deliberate trying. His shift offers an important corrective to the highly intellectualistic and rationalistic picture of human agency that he saw prevailing. But if taken to the extreme, his account could end up privileging agents who continue to do what they already do well above those who seek to develop new skills or to alter their approach to some existing skill, since learning new skills and refining skills both can involve periods of deliberative and relatively unskilled behavior. But because this type of learning seems to be an expression of one’s expertise, this could seem to pose a problem for Dreyfus’s account.

My proposal is that in order to better capture the whole of human agency—including expert agency—we would do well to appreciate the potential fluidity between skillful coping and deliberative aspiration, planning, and learning. However, I think we can do that within a Dreyfussian framework. In what remains, I draw on Dreyfus’s own writings and

(appropriately for an essay on Dreyfus) on passages from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* to briefly sketch an account of the relationship between intentional, conscious skill development and the absorbed coping Dreyfus emphasizes throughout his work.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes:

Taken concretely, man is [. . .] this back-and-forth of existence that sometimes allows itself to exist as a body and sometimes carries itself into personal acts. Psychological motives and bodily events can overlap because there is no single movement in a living body that is an absolute accident with regard to psychological intentions and no single psychological act that has not found at least its germ or its general outline in physiological dispositions . . . [Through] an imperceptible shift, an organic process opens up into a human behavior, an instinctive act turns back on itself and becomes an emotion, or, inversely, a human act becomes dormant and is continued absentmindedly as a reflex.

(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 90)

On Merleau-Ponty's account, the human agent exhibits two different ways of existing.¹⁴ Sometimes she exists as a body with motor understanding, an existence characterized by habitual actions and reflexes, some of which were once intentional actions but have now sunk into muscle memory; others she exists in a way that involves what Merleau-Ponty calls "personal acts," an existence characterized by self-conscious planning, assessment, and deliberation about what to do. Instead of being at odds, however, these ways of existing are intertwined in both directions. In Dreyfus's terminology, our absorbed skillful coping (Merleau-Ponty's motor intentionality) is shaped by our deliberation (Merleau-Ponty's personal acts) and our deliberative agency depends on our skillful bodily coping. In "The Primacy of Phenomenology," Dreyfus gestures at the entanglement of these two ways of being. Of Merleau-Ponty, he writes:

He calls the phenomenon of absorbed coping *motor intentionality*, and claims that it is our basic form of intentionality, missed by those who suppose that in all comportment the agent's movements must be guided by what the agent (consciously or unconsciously) is trying to achieve.

(Dreyfus 2014: 150)

A little later, however, he adds: "Absorbed coping turns out to be occasioned by trying, but the skilled activity itself is caused not by trying, but by a response to a gestalt tension" (2014: 159). Conscious trying, or what Merleau-Ponty calls personal acts, can occasion sensitivity to a particular context or gestalt in ways that, depending on one's skills, initiate either absorbed coping or the learning process, or perhaps both in what Merleau-Ponty describes as "this back-and-forth of existence." In short, our deliberately seeking to develop new skills or to learn new ways to respond to unfamiliar situations can allow for expanded possibilities for skillful coping and can help us see or feel new ways in which our already acquired skills can be used.

Our consciously committing ourselves to particular acts, paths, and projects influences the way the world is polarized and shapes the gestalt in which we find ourselves. Dreyfus's work shows how we overlook much of human agency if we too quickly identify human agency with deliberative processes, self-conscious intentions, and reflectively self-aware experience of that agency. In his zeal to push in the other direction, however, Dreyfus may end up underappreciating the conscious, intentional, and deliberative aspects of human agency. My suggestion is that by more fully incorporating Merleau-Ponty's notion of the two ways

of existing into to Dreyfus's account, we can better account for the whole of human agency, including the process of aspiration and the way in which we can consciously seek to be different, sometimes better than we currently are.

Related topics

See Chapters 8 (on Heidegger) and 13 (on Merleau-Ponty).

Notes

- 1 For examples, see skillful (Dreyfus 2014: 84, 86, 88, 89, 94, 98, 116); absorbed (81, 94, 95, 96, 99, 101, 147–151); immediate (84); everyday (81, 90; 94, 96 107, 116); embodied (94, 105, 240).
- 2 In this vein, Crowell (2013: 257–259) describes the coping Dreyfus focuses on as “mindless.” He develops this term from Dreyfus (1991: 3): “At the foundation of Heidegger’s new approach is a phenomenology of ‘mindless’ everyday coping skills as the basis of all intelligibility.”
- 3 For one example of Dreyfus’s and McDowell’s exchange, see Dreyfus (2007) and McDowell (2007).
- 4 The term “affordance” comes from Gibson’s (1986).
- 5 Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012: 143–148) makes similar claims in his analysis of habit in *Phenomenology of Perception*. He suggests that the way a skilled organist quickly adjusts to an organ with additional or fewer keyboards highlights the difference between the bodily space we inhabit and objective space.
- 6 As noted earlier, there is significant disagreement about what is involved in human experience being conceptually articulated, representational, reflective, and the like.
- 7 Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012: 459) claims that our particular characteristics “are the price we pay, without even thinking about it, for being in the world.”
- 8 Dreyfus (2014: 35) thinks that when something goes wrong for the expert, “[h]e detachedly calculates his actions even more poorly than does the competent performer since he has forgotten many of the guiding rules that he knew and used when competent, and his performance suddenly becomes halting, uncertain, and even inappropriate.”
- 9 Of course, computers (or, increasingly, chess computer programs) now routinely beat expert chess players, but it was a number of years before Gary Kasparov, then World Chess Champion, was defeated by IBM’s Deep Blue in 1997. Although the eventual inaccuracy of Dreyfus’s pessimistic predictions has been seen by some as a simple repudiation of Dreyfus’s criticisms of artificial intelligence, the issues are more complex than that. For one, Dreyfus’s criticisms of early artificial intelligence neither earned him many friends in the AI community nor helped him find a receptive audience. As a result, the response to Dreyfus’s losing to MacHack, a chess playing computer, in 1967 led to more satisfaction than was probably merited for the computer beating an amateur level chess player. As Daniel Crevier (1993) puts it, “[T]ime has proven the accuracy and perceptiveness of some of Dreyfus’s comments. Had he formulated them less aggressively, constructive actions they suggested might have been taken earlier. In fact, it was almost uncanny for a non-expert in computer science to anticipate as early as 1965 the difficulties AI would run into, and to point out why!” For his part, Dreyfus recounts his version of the exchanges in various places, including in *Mind over Machine* (1986) and *What Computers Still Can’t Do* (1992). In his more recent, “Why Heideggerian AI Failed and How Fixing It Would Require Making It More Heideggerian” (Chapter 12 in *Skillful Coping*), Dreyfus analyzes and critiques more recent AI developments that have tried, sometimes explicitly, to address the worries Dreyfus raises in his earlier work.
- 10 In his work on expert performance, Anders Ericsson (2016) suggests that experts have more detailed and sophisticated conceptual maps than ordinary performers (see *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*). Although this may appear to be in conflict with Dreyfus’s position, much of this depends on how we interpret Ericsson’s notion of conceptual maps.
- 11 Again, Dreyfus’s characterization of representation is a point of contention between Dreyfus and Searle. For more on Dreyfus’s view, see “Heidegger’s Critique of the Husserl/Searle Account of Intentionality” and “The Primacy of Phenomenology over Logical Analysis” (Dreyfus 2014).

- 12 On a Merleau-Pontyan reading, an expert's reflex-like response is more than mere reflex because of the way it is situated in some larger whole (see Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012: 81–90).
- 13 When golfers rework their swing, for example, they can go through a period of less than optimal performance. But when undertaken well, it can also lead to more expert performance, both by typical standards of expertise and by the standard of ongoing coping in a range of situations.
- 14 Charles Siewert (2013: 219) describes Merleau-Ponty as distinguishing between “two different ways of being a subject” and not “two subjects (an ‘I’ and a ‘habit body’).”

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Further reading

H. Dreyfus and C. Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) offers an account of skillful perception and action as part of their argument against the Cartesian epistemic picture they think has (problematically) dominated modern philosophy. Sean Kelly (2005), “Closing the Gap: Phenomenology and Logical Analysis,” *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* 13/2, 4–24, analyzes the relationship between Dreyfus (phenomenology) and Searle (logical analysis) on topics including intentionality and engaged coping, proposing both merely apparent and genuine points of disagreement between the two. J. Schear (ed.), *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate* (New

York: Routledge, 2013) is a rich collection of papers devoted to the debate between Dreyfus and McDowell (including essays from both Dreyfus and McDowell). E. Fridland (2014), “They’ve Lost Control: Reflections on Skill,” *Synthese* 191, 2729–2750, and M. Brownstein (2014), “Rationalizing Flow: Agency in Skilled Unreflective Action,” *Philosophical Studies* 168, 545–568, both examine the nature of skill. Fridland is critical of Dreyfus’s position; Brownstein is sympathetic to Dreyfus’s approach.