

## Are we essentially rational animals?

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1. John McDowell says “yes.” Hubert Dreyfus says “no.” Who’s right?

Call the thesis that human beings are essentially rational animals *the venerable thesis*. In the first part of this chapter I seek to show that the venerable thesis is what the McDowell–Dreyfus exchange, to the extent that it is a real dispute, is about. I then turn to distinguish and reconstruct two of Dreyfus’s arguments against McDowell – the argument from critical distance, on the one hand, and the phenomenological argument from the “merging” structure of embodied skilful comportment, on the other. The first argument, I suggest, misfires. The second, by contrast, promises to meet its target; the question of the persuasiveness of the argument turns on whether Dreyfus’s phenomenology of “merging” is faithful. Assuming it is, the rationalist such as McDowell might rejoin with a separate argument for our essentially rational way of being that calls attention to our power to ask the question of what, or who, we are. This argument, however, supports only a weak reading of the venerable thesis with which Dreyfus, at least according to some expressions of his views, need not disagree. Before turning to the arguments, however, let me first introduce the venerable thesis by guarding against a possible misunderstanding of it, after which I’ll proceed to offer two alternative readings of it. Then I will present the above mentioned arguments, after which I will close by briefly considering the difficult and pressing exegetical question, prompted by the McDowell-Dreyfus debate, that any reader of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* must confront: what does Heidegger think of the traditional thought that we are essentially rational animals? Or: What (if any) is the place of reason in Heidegger’s account of human existence?

2. The venerable thesis, if it stands *any* chance of being true, must not entail that human beings always think and act rationally. To see that this entailment does not hold, we must distinguish rationality as a property of particular thoughts and actions (often praiseworthy) from rationality as a capacity. Irrational thoughts or actions are defective expressions of the capacity for rationality. Accordingly, the wealth of irrational thoughts and actions in human life, far from refuting the venerable thesis, would serve to support it, so long as we hear “rational” in the capacity sense. After all, it is only a being capable of rationality that can be intelligibly assessed as thinking or acting irrationally.<sup>1</sup>

There are at least two different readings of “*essentially* rational” in the venerable thesis. There are, that is, two different contrasts to the claim that we are contingently rational animals. According to the claim that we are contingently rational, it is an accidental fact about us that we are beings possessed of the capacity for rationality; we could do without this capacity and go on perfectly well being what we are. The first contrasting essentialist thesis is this: Rationality is essentially *one* of our capacities. If you believe this, then you think that we have *other* essential capacities that are not the expression of, or otherwise wrapped up with, the capacity for rationality. You might, for example, think human beings are a kind of mishmash of various interacting but not tightly unified capacities, allowing even for structural tensions among the capacities that make up the human. This I will call the weak reading of the venerable thesis.

The second, and indeed stronger, reading is: Rationality is the form of the human as such, the very essence of being human. The capacity for rationality, on this stronger reading, is our central and defining feature. It is, evidently, what makes us who we are. Everything essentially human is precisely *that* by virtue of being an expression of, or perhaps support for,

the capacity for rationality. Rationality is, one might say, the foreground of our being. Anything that is in the background deserves to be in the picture at all only because it is background *to the foreground*, namely rationality.<sup>2</sup>

These two readings of the venerable thesis are very rough formulations, to be sure, but they will suffice for us to turn now to the exchange between Dreyfus and McDowell.

3. In his *Mind and World*, McDowell's central argument against nonconceptualism about experience starts with the thought that our empirical judgments are answerable to the world. What does it take for this to be so? For our empirical judgments to be genuinely answerable to the world, our experience of the world must afford us reasons to judge one way or another. And for experience to afford us reasons to judge one way or another, experience must be informed by conceptual capacities. That is: experience must have the kind of content that can "serve up" *reasons* for judgment, reasons *for* the judging subject. Accordingly, experience must have conceptual content, not nonconceptual content. As McDowell puts it:

To avoid making it unintelligible how the deliverances of sensibility can stand in grounding relations to paradigmatic exercises of the understanding such as judgments and beliefs, ...we must insist that the understanding is already inextricably implicated in the deliverances of sensibility themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Dreyfus glosses the argument as follows:

If I understand him rightly, McDowell accepts the transcendental argument that the conditions of the possibility of the mind relating its content to the world requires conceptual capacities, and these capacities *must be always and everywhere operative* in human experience.<sup>4</sup>

Now McDowell's argument has, at every turn, provoked much rich discussion and objection. But it is worth noting at the outset that, so set out, the argument is invalid, at least insofar as it purports to deliver the conclusion that sensibility must *as such* be conceptually structured. It shows at most that *some* deliverances of sensibility must be already informed by conceptual

understanding. It hardly shows that *all* experience must be permeated by conceptual understanding. Grant that for experience to justify (“ground”) knowledge it must provide reasons for the knowing subject. Grant, moreover, that experience must be conceptually structured to provide such reasons. Granting all that, the argument, to be valid, would have to conclude rather with: experience, *so far as it matters for rational knowledge of objective reality*, cannot be nonconceptual. This conclusion is entirely consistent with a kind of experiential pluralism according to which experience, so far as it matters for *other* (nonepistemic) forms of relation to the world, need not make available reasons for judgment and belief. On such a pluralistic view, experiential life is a part of, but is not exhausted by, epistemic life.

The original context of McDowell’s argument, recall, targeted a pair of claims put forward by Evans in his discussion of the relationship between perception and judgment in *Varieties of Reference*. Simplifying madly, the pair of claims is that (i) perception as such has nonconceptual content and (ii) perception is a basis (“input”) for judgment and belief. McDowell in effect argued that if Evans wants (ii), as he should, he should not endorse (i). But granting that argument against Evans, one would need further premises to establish the claim that the content of perceptual experience is *all and only* conceptual.

Now return to the venerable thesis. According to the weak reading, rationality is a particular capacity among others that belongs to us essentially. The weak reading of the venerable thesis is perfectly adequate to the terms and ambitions of McDowell’s argument outlined above. That there is *a* mode of sensory consciousness informed by the understanding, but not that *all* modes of sensory consciousness are so informed, requires only the weak reading. However, Dreyfus’s objection to McDowell is indeed a challenge to the thesis that experience is all and only conceptual – that we are, as Dreyfus likes to put it,

necessarily “full-time” rational animals. Dreyfus’s objection, however, does not challenge the claim that we are necessarily “part-time” rational animals – which is one way of putting the weak reading of the venerable thesis. But the weak reading is all McDowell needs, and all that his argument entitles him to, for the insistence that experience be capable of standing in grounding relations to judgment.

The more modest conclusion that makes the argument valid accordingly leaves open the acknowledgement of forms of experience that do not matter for rational knowledge of objective reality, and thereby need not be conceptual.<sup>5</sup> So what might we conclude, based on what I have said thus far, about the McDowell–Dreyfus dispute? In short, Dreyfus is objecting to a bad argument for a conclusion that McDowell does not in fact need. This sounds like a disappointing result.

4. It is worth noting that McDowell basically grants the point at issue in an earlier exchange with Charles Taylor. Taylor, like Dreyfus drawing on the existential phenomenological tradition, introduces what he calls “a background of pre-understanding” {-} that is, a background of preconceptual embodied coping with the world {-} that provides a setting for, but does not fall within the scope of, “conceptual, reflective thought.” McDowell’s reply in that context is instructive:

How] much would it have helped me if I had made much of a background of pre-understanding? I agree with Taylor that there is something between spontaneity in what he calls “the strong Kantian sense, turning crucially on conceptual, reflective thought,” on the one hand, and conformity to Galilean law, on the other. We need this middle ground for thinking about non-human animals, and it is what is supposed to be occupied by pre-understanding even in our case. But the difficulty that concerns me arises because making up our minds about the world is an exercise of spontaneity in precisely the Kantian sense. The problem is how spontaneity in that sense could be rationally constrained by receptivity.<sup>6</sup>

This in effect is a concessive stance to Taylor's background of preunderstanding. Though McDowell hardly presents himself as a convert ("what is supposed to be occupied by"), he himself points out that "pre-understanding" does not bear on his problem about the constraint on spontaneity by receptivity. It is as if he is saying: "I am happy to acknowledge a form of skilfull rapport with the world, a mode of receptivity, that does not have to do with reasons for judgment. I am even happy to grant that this form of relation to the world provides an essential setting for, but does not fall within, our power of rational thought. I am happy to do all this, so long as I am granted the variety of receptivity germane to my book's problem, which is precisely what we need to secure the intelligibility of empirical judgment." This stance is available to McDowell in the more recent exchange with Dreyfus, but it is not one he is at present willing to rehearse. If not the imperialism of hostile take over, McDowell is now keen on a friendly annexation of the kind of background phenomena that interest Taylor and Dreyfus.<sup>7</sup> Cautionary concession, it seems, has given way to a kind of triumphalism about reason.

5. McDowell might respond to the claim that his argument, so far as it purports to demonstrate that experience is all and only conceptual, overreaches by reminding us of the centerpiece of the diagnostic phase of his argument. The diagnostic question, recall, is this: why would a philosopher refuse to acknowledge the very possibility that sensibility can be informed by our rational capacities for thought and judgment? McDowell's answer to this question from Lecture IV ("Reason and Nature") in *Mind and World* is by now familiar. It is because the modern philosopher is in the grip of a dualism of nature and reason. Nature is the realm of Galilean law. Our sensory systems belong within the realm of nature so understood.

Contrast our capacity for rationality, which is a capacity for freedom and self-determination and thereby cannot be properly understood as a bit of mere nature. Our sensory consciousness therefore cannot possibly be combined with our capacity for rationality, the anxious modern philosopher insists. McDowell urges that if our conception of what can count as natural is relaxed, to include second nature, we can make room for sensibility as at once a rational and natural phenomenon.

Whatever one's estimate of the promise of that piece of therapy, the point to register here is that the diagnosis does not apply to a philosopher like Dreyfus, who is perfectly happy to grant that sensory experience *can be* informed by conceptual capacities, but who is not willing to grant that *all* modes of sensory experience are, much less must be, so informed? McDowell at times writes as if the philosopher who contests his conceptualism *cannot but* be in the grip of a dualism of nature, or the body, and reason. But diagnosing the inability of some philosophers, purportedly caught in the grip of a bad picture, to appreciate the very idea of rational receptivity does not supply the missing premise for the global conceptualist conclusion. Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus, and presumably Taylor, need not deny an involvement on the part of conceptual rationality in the phenomenology of embodiment – need not deny that intentions can be *in* action – to claim that the whole story about our bodily being in the world (*être au monde*), and much of what is interesting about that story, is not captured by that involvement.

6. The strong reading of the venerable thesis is not supported by, or needed for, the key argument against nonconceptualism about experience, I have argued. But McDowell certainly announces his commitment to the strong reading. As he says, “conceptual rationality is everywhere in our lives in so far as our lives are distinctively human.”<sup>8</sup>

Following up on the kinship, in his vision of rationality “permeation,” between the involvement of conceptual capacities in perceptual experience and their involvement in bodily movement, McDowell writes,

My claim is that capacities that are conceptual, capacities that belong to their possessor’s rationality, are operative not only in reflective thought and action but also at the ground-floor level at which there is absorbed coping and acting in flow{...}Human beings are rational animals. What could be more natural than to hold that the capacities that belong to what differentiates human beings from other animals, their rationality, are operative in activity that is essentially human, including activity at the ground-floor level?<sup>9</sup>

To this question Dreyfus has replied with the following series of challenging questions:

Rather than take for granted that critical rationality is the defining feature of human beings, we should ask: What is rationality? Is it required? Should it be? Does it permeate all our activity? How does it relate to mastery? If critical distance undermines expertise, we had better not view rationality as a pervasive obligation.<sup>10</sup>

Now *this* sounds like a genuine dispute. I want now to consider two of Dreyfus’s central arguments against the claim that rationality permeates all of our activity and experience. The first argument, which I do not believe is persuasive, is what I call the argument from critical distance. The second argument, which I believe promises to meet its target, is what I will call the argument from merging. Part of my aim here is just to distinguish these two arguments (which Dreyfus at times runs together) if only as a way of identifying the precise issues at stake.

7. The argument from critical distance starts with the charge of a category mistake. In reply to McDowell’s claim that nothing could be more natural than the idea that conceptual capacities, capacities that belong to our rationality, are “operative,” or “permeate,” or are “in



play” in our activity, Dreyfus replies: capacities cannot pervade anything. Capacities are exercised on occasion. But that does not allow one to conclude that capacities, when they are not exercised, nonetheless pervade or are “operative.” To think otherwise, Dreyfus alleges, is to commit a category mistake.<sup>11</sup> If there is anything to the idea that the capacity for rationality permeates activity, it must be that one is constantly exercising it by stepping back reflectively from one’s acting in flow. But this would precisely undermine acting in flow, as Dreyfus claims above. Hence Dreyfus’s warning that we had better not view rationality as a pervasive obligation.

The distinction between a capacity or power and its exercise is certainly worth recognizing.<sup>12</sup> Consider my capacity to twirl my pencil. On occasion I find myself exercising the capacity to twirl my pencil. Does it follow that the capacity permeates or pervades my activity as such? That obviously seems false.

One might reply that the capacity to twirl one’s pencil is indeed pervasive because capacities, as such, are inherently general. Capacities are inherently general because their being is not exhausted by their exercise on a particular occasion. As Kenny puts it: “there are no genuine abilities which are abilities to do things only on one occasion.”<sup>13</sup> Consider the absurdity of crediting someone with the ability to ride a bicycle who only can ride a bike on *one block on a single* occasion. This inherent generality of capacities, however, does not suffice for pervasiveness. Whatever the pervasiveness of a capacity ultimately amounts to, if it has any sense, it surely has to be more than the idea that a capacity by its very nature is not tied to, or sunk in, a particular occasion of its exercise. To claim the title of “pervasive,” a capacity has to be, one wants to say, more *actual* than the mere in principal potentiality of its exercise across a range of diverse occasions.

Let us consider another capacity, the virtue of kindness. This is, very roughly, the capacity to be kind in the right way at the right time in the right circumstances. If someone possesses this virtue, it seems perfectly intelligible, and not a category mistake, to say that the capacity is pervasive. This seems intelligible because the life and ongoing activity of the possessor of the virtue of kindness is pervaded by it. To be kind, after all, is to live in a certain way – namely, with an open-eyed *readiness* for the characteristic circumstances that call upon the exercise of one’s capacity for kindness. That is what it is *to be* kind. So here there is sense to the idea of a capacity that is pervasively present where the pervasiveness does not entail the constant de facto exercise of the capacity. One could easily imagine someone, an Ebenezer Scrooge, who had hitherto been thoroughly mean-spirited and petty towards others, consumed by *Schadenfreude* and callous indifference – without the virtue of kindness – who somehow undergoes a conversion, becoming kind. That this kind of global transformation is one in which one’s world, one might say, becomes a fundamentally different place further suggests that the capacity for kindness can indeed be faithfully called pervasive.

There is certainly more to say about the distinction between nonpervasive and pervasive capacities. But supposing there is something to it, then Dreyfus’s charge of a category mistake is misplaced. The very idea of a capacity that pervades one’s activity, indeed one’s life, far from being nonsensical, is an idea that makes sense. It hardly has the absurd ring of asking “But where is the University?” after being shown around Christ Church, the Bodleian Library, and the Ashmolean Museum.<sup>14</sup>

The question, then, is: Where does rationality, understood in McDowellian terms as a capacity to be responsive to reasons as such, belong? Is it a pervasive capacity, like kindness, or a merely general capacity, like the capacity to twirl one’s pencil? Dreyfus uses evidence of

the exercise of the capacity for critical rationality disrupting the flow of absorbed coping to tell against rationality being understood as a pervasive capacity. But if there is a notion of pervasiveness that does not consist in constant exercise, then that evidence does not work.

That is: *While* one is absorbed in the flow of some activity, such as playing a sport at peak performance, engaging in reflection – a paradigmatic exercise of the capacity for rationality – is generally a bad idea, at least insofar as one wants to stay in the flow. After all, to engage in reflection is generally (if not always) to take up a deliberative stance of critical distance, a “stepping back” which tends to take one out of the absorption characteristic of the flow. But here the capacity of rationality is pictured as disrupting the flow because it is pictured as exercised in an actual “stepping back,” inaugurating a course of reflection, which is not the question. The question is whether rationality *qua* capacity is pervasive, where its pervasiveness does not consist in the process of an ongoing constant exercise (which would indeed be inimical to flow).

I characterized the pervasiveness of the capacity for kindness as living in a certain way, with one’s modes of activity and feeling and thought structured by a readiness to be kind when appropriate. If we understand the pervasiveness of the capacity for rationality along similar lines, possessing the capacity for rationality would likewise be a matter of living in a certain way, ready and open to the circumstances that call upon one’s capacity to be responsive to reasons. So understood, the presence of the ability to step back and adopt a stance of critical distance with regard to one’s activity would not disrupt the flow of absorbed coping. After all, being absorbed in the flow of activity is not generally a characteristic circumstance that invites rational scrutiny. One might further suggest that it is *part* of what it is genuinely to possess the capacity for rationality that one precisely does not *exercise* the capacity to step back in circumstances in which rational deliberation would unduly disrupt

the course of the activity at issue. Compare the way in which not behaving kindly in circumstances that do not invite it is precisely part of what it is to be genuinely kind.

Characterizing a capacity as pervasive, then, is no category mistake. And the pervasive presence of the capacity for critical rationality in those who possess it need not disturb or otherwise sabotage the flow of their absorbed activity. This defense of McDowell's position against Dreyfus's argument from critical distance does not, it is worth noting, decide which of the two readings of the venerable thesis we should endorse. For, the very intelligibility of rationality as a pervasive capacity does not in any way decide whether it is one among other essential capacities of the human (like kindness), or rather *the* core capacity of the human. Recognizing a sense of the pervasiveness of rationality along the lines suggested above at most removes an obstacle that stands in the way of adopting the stronger reading of the venerable thesis.

8. There is a separate, and I believe more promising, argument that Dreyfus has offered against the pervasiveness of rationality, understood along the lines of the strong reading of the venerable thesis. So I want now to try and bring that argument into view. The pervasiveness of rationality as a capacity, I have argued, does not entail its constant exercise, in the sense of ongoing engagement in critical reflection. I have also suggested that it is integral to the possession of the capacity for rationality precisely not to "step back" and subject one's flow of activity to rational scrutiny. However, both of these claims are fully consistent with the idea that what *was* going on in the flow of absorbed coping is perfectly available for rational scrutiny, retrospectively, after the flow is over, as McDowell would surely insist. And indeed, in McDowell's hands, the pervasiveness claim does imply that there is no distinctively human activity, however flowing, that is not in principle available to

be taken up by the power of critical reflection, if only retrospectively – hence his commitment to our essentially rational way of being in the strong sense. As McDowell once put it: “we cannot put limits on the self-scrutiny of reason.”<sup>15</sup> (There may be contingent issues about bad memory, and so on, but there is nothing in principle about the flow of absorbed activity, on McDowell’s view, that would prevent it from being taken up by critical rationality.) So, absorbed activity must have the right *form* to be taken up by our power of rationality, on pain of it being ruled out of the court of the distinctively human. Conceptual rationality, after all, is “everywhere in our lives.”

And here Dreyfus has offered a phenomenological argument that denies that absorbed coping has conceptual form, the form suitable to our power of rationality. The argument is phenomenological because its key move is the identification of a decisive experiential feature of absorbed coping, namely “merging,” that precludes it from falling within the space of reasons. The basic shape of the argument runs as follows, the terms of which I will go on to explain:

- (1) The capacity for rationality requires the presence of determinate objects.
- (2) The merging character of absorbed coping precludes the presence of determinate objects.
- (3) Absorbed coping is thus not available to the capacity for rationality.
- (4) Therefore, it is not the case that human beings are essentially rational in the strong sense.<sup>16</sup>

Rationality requires the presence of determinate objects. Consider two paradigmatic exercises of the capacity for rationality, making a judgment and acting intentionally. When one makes a judgment, there is an object, a determinate identity, present to one as one's topic. So, for example, when one judges *that Spring has begun*, there is present to one a thinkable element (*Spring*) that can figure, if challenged (say), in one's reasons for judgment. When one acts intentionally, there is something, a determinate object, that is present to one that one is (oneself) doing or bringing about – the object of one's intention. So, for example, when one is walking across the street or building a house, one's walking across the street or the house one is building figure as thinkable elements fit to serve in reasons one could give for acting as one does. In judging, one is *taking* something to be true about a determinate object. In acting, one is *making* a determinate object true. Both judging and acting are forms of rational engagement with the world that involve the presence of determinate objects to the subject of rational engagement. The engagement is rational because determinate objects can figure in reasons to which one is responsive, and which one can in principle offer, in the context of justifying or otherwise considering one's judgment or one's action.

What, more concretely, is the presence of a determinate object? We can title such presence subject–object presence. Subject–object presence is a way in which aspects of the world are presented to one, and correlatively, a way of being present to, or aware of, oneself as being presented with the world this way. Subject–object presence is the presence characteristic of rational agency, the two basic forms of which are judging and acting. What, we may ask, is the phenomenology of subject–object presence? How, that is, do determinate objects “show up” in rational agency, in the broad sense of making judgments and acting intentionally?

John Haugeland once characterized the notion of an empirical object as “an autonomous, authoritative, accessible.”<sup>17</sup> This characterization was offered in an inquiry into the possibility of empirical truth. (I’ll turn to action in a moment.) First, an object is autonomous because it presents itself as independent of my relation to it. An object is given to me as *other* than me, *already there*, out there on its own. Kant characterizes this autonomy in terms of the finitude of intuition.<sup>18</sup> Second, an object is authoritative because it occupies a position of authority over my judgment: the independent object “says” whether my judgment about it is true or false; the object is “the boss” of my judgment. It shows up to me, one might say, as the thing that could show me up. This feature of being an object, its standing over against the subject, is what McDowell stresses in his demand, against Davidsonian coherentism, for intelligible “constraint” by objects, i.e. constraint *on* the subject positioned to make judgments.<sup>19</sup> Kant characterizes this authority in terms of the relation of cognition to its object “carrying something of necessity with it.” (Add note: Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. A104) And third, an object is accessible in that it is *there* for me, poised to play its role as an autonomous authority vis-à-vis my judgment. McDowell characterizes this in terms of the visible object “speaking” to one, as if to say, “see me as I am.”<sup>20</sup> These features of the object – an autonomous, authoritative, accessible – well capture the structure of awareness and object at work in empirical judgment. This is the subject–object presence of judgment – or, in McDowell’s terms, the subject–object presence of the receptivity of experience that constrains judgment.

Subject–object presence is not limited to conceptual experience and judgment, for it applies to intentional action as well, only the terms are reversed. When I act, I bring about some change in the world. I make a difference, even if only a difference in my own location by moving. For this to happen, I must of course be in the world. However, in acting I am

present to myself as in a sense standing apart from things, autonomous, insofar as I am capable of *intervening* in the world – realizing “the thing to do” – and thereby making things happen in the world. Second, in acting, *I* am the authority (not the object), to the extent that the world is supposed to measure up to my intention. In successfully realizing my intention I make true some state of affairs that hitherto did not exist. To speak dramatically, if I prevail, or realize my intention, the world has conceded. And lastly, I am “accessible” to the world, insofar as the world, or at least aspects of it, can be affected, or shaped, by my action – that is, can serve as the “patient” of my agency. In intentional action then, as in judging, we have the form of consciousness characteristic of rational agency. By this I mean a consciousness of oneself as a distinct existent in an independent world of determinate objects – in the broad sense that includes the world as it is, and the world as it is to be. These determinate objects are, on the one hand, the truthmakers of one’s judgments, and, on the other hand, the objects of one’s truthmaking endeavors (i.e. one’s intentions).

It is helpful to characterize subject-object presence in terms of a form of distance between the subject and its world. Let me guard against two possible misunderstandings. The distance here is *not* the skeptical distance that plagues much modern epistemological reflection on our relation to the world. This is the sense of distance according to which our thoughts, it is feared, are all false (for all we know) since some of them are false, or because an evil demon might be deceiving us, or perhaps simply because they are *our* thoughts. McDowell rightly diagnoses and debunks this sense of skeptical distance: “of course thought can be distanced from the world by being false, but there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought.”<sup>21</sup> To think otherwise is to fall prey to what Hegel characterized as “what calls itself fear of error reveals itself rather as fear of the truth.”<sup>22</sup>



Secondly, the distance at issue is *not* the distanced posture of the contemplative subject pondering things, detached and disengaged, adopting the critical gaze *du Penseur*. Just as there is no skeptical distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought, there is nothing in the very idea of perceiving or making judgments about objects, much less *acting*, that entails a contemplative distance of disengagement or detachment.<sup>23</sup>

Rather, the distance at work in subject–object presence is more basic than any kind of detached style of being in the world. The distance I mean characterizes the structure of awareness and object as such, which *any* form of reason-responsive engagement with the world, detached or not, presupposes. What *this* sense of distance involves is the appreciation of the very distinction between the subject and her thinkable objects, on the one hand, and the very distinction between the agent and her objects of intention, on the other. Without appreciating these distinctions, the very intelligibility of a *gap* between a (possibly false) thought and its object, or a *gap* between a (possibly unfulfilled) intention and its object, would not make any sense. And without the appreciation of the possibility of such gaps, the very idea of rational thought and intention would fall apart. For, any recognizable notion of responsiveness to reasons as such – reasons *for* the subject – presupposes determinate objects present as distinct from the reasoning subject, the kinds of things that can be cited in the practice of discovering what is, or what is not, reason for what.

Subject–object presence, then, is an independent reality of determinate objects – the world as it is, or is to be – present to a rational subject in a position to judge and act for reasons. The second premise of the argument above is that the merging character of absorbed coping precludes such presence. By “merging,” Dreyfus means, negatively, the absence of the characteristic structure of subject–object presence. This absence is what Dreyfus draws

from Merleau-Ponty in the football passage that Dreyfus makes so much of, particularly with the key phrase “faire corps avec lui”:

For the player in action the football field is not an “object.” It is pervaded by lines of force...and is articulated into sectors (for example, the “openings” between the adversaries), which call for a certain mode of action. The field itself is not given;...the player becomes one with it [*fait corps avec lui*]....At this moment consciousness is nothing but the dialectic of milieu and action. Each maneuver called forth from the player modifies the character of the field and establishes new lines of force in which the action in turn unfolds and is accomplished, again altering the phenomenal field.<sup>24</sup>

In this description of merging, the relevant contrast is between the field as an object that is *given* to be known or acted upon versus the field as a vortex of forces with which the player “becomes one.” “Lines of force” – or what Dreyfus calls a “shifting field of attractions and repulsions” that solicit one’s skilful comportment – are precisely not given as determinate objects affording opportunities for knowledge or manipulation. Correlatively, the player does not experience himself as in any sense distinct from a domain to be known or acted upon (e.g. made different than it is). Rather, he experiences himself as *one* with a field, at most a dynamic “moment” in a dialectical whole. So, insofar as reason-responsive engagement requires the presence of determinate objects, and the presence of determinate objects is subject–object presence, the merging at work in at least a certain form of skilful comportment, with its absence of subject–object presence, is not adapted to the demands of reason-responsive engagement . Not every aspect of experience, then, is present in a form in which it is suitable to constitute the content of conceptual capacities (to mimic one of McDowell’s key formulations). Lines of force, or the shifting phenomenal field of attractions and repulsions, are not determinate objects of thought or intention, Dreyfus suggests, for they are not items one can so much as single out, much less hold still. They simply do not have that kind of determinate identity. They are nothing apart from their dynamic place in the throes of embodied comportment. And without having a determinate (or determinable)

identity, they cannot serve as topics with which to reason. Accordingly, reason does not have its characteristic material with which to operate (not even retrospectively). So if the phenomenology of merging presence is accurate, absorbed coping does not have the right form to figure in reasons, marking the limits of reason's scope. McDowell would thus be mistaken in his claim that there is no form of human activity that is not in principle available to be taken up by the power of critical reflection. And the strong version of the venerable thesis, that all distinctively human activity is pervasively rational, would be false. If the argument from merging can be made to stick, rationality may necessarily be one of our capacities, but it does not pervade our activity as such, and therewith could not be *the* form of our life.

That, then, is the basic shape of the argument from merging. Clearly much more would need to be said to fill it out. My main aim is simply to present the argument so as to bring it into view. Questions that arise include: What precisely is a "line of force", or an "attraction" or "repulsion"? What is the metaphysics of such things, if not determinate objects that can figure in reasons? It is no accident that Dreyfus characterizes his project in terms of describing the "nonconceptual *world* of absorbed coping." The denial of the presence of determinate objects in at least a certain form of skillful comportment is a claim entered in the ontological investigation of the world, not merely a claim limited to the study of our way of relating to the world. (This, as I read him, is faithful to Merleau-Ponty's intentions in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.)

Those sympathetic to the venerable thesis will rightly ask: Is it really the case there is no way a line of force can figure in a reason? Suppose the football player is watching a videotape of the match, after it has concluded, with his fellow players and coaches. Could not a line of force in some sense be pointed out, or somehow cottoned onto, in the context of

strategic deliberation about how things went during some stretch of the match, in the service of how things might go in future matches? If so, isn't that sufficient for it to be a determinate object, and thereby capable of figuring in a reason for action? Dreyfus's basic thesis about merging is that the lines of force are *only* available as *bodily* solicitations in the dynamic flow of activity: without that form of solicitation, the line of force simply ceases to be, disappears, vanishes. The field of attractions and repulsions is accordingly not composed of elements that could be held onto and reidentified retrospectively in the envisaged football deliberation. They are literally unthinkable, at least for the discursive intellect, and in a sense then, ineffable – a point Dreyfus, far from shying away from, has been eager to insist upon. In sum, if Dreyfus's phenomenology of merging is faithful, then he has identified a form of activity that falls outside the reach of our power of rationality and its characteristic material, namely determinate objects fit to figure in reasons. (How exactly lines of force, or attractions and repulsions, can be themes of phenomenological description is a methodological question the argument from merging obviously invites.)

9. While the argument from critical distance misfires, the argument from merging, if phenomenologically on-key, challenges the truth of the venerable thesis that we are essentially rational animals, on its strong reading. The friend of the venerable thesis might rejoin by offering a short argument in favor of the strong version of the venerable thesis.<sup>25</sup> One natural way to approach the question "Are we essentially rational animals?" is to start with oneself: "Well, what am *I*?" Descartes's meditator poses this question to himself in the Second Meditation (*Meditations on First Philosophy*). His immediate answer is "rational animal." But the meditator quickly loses patience with this answer: time is short, even for a

meditator, and such “subtleties” of encrusted Aristotelian tradition evidently are not worth pursuing.

But suppose we linger with the question rather than the meditator’s immediate answer. That is, perhaps the very asking of the question – “what am I?” – contains the materials for an answer to it. In reply to the question, I can think the thought: I am a human being. After *this* reply to my first-personal question, I can entertain the more general question: What, then, is a human being? And *then* “rational animal” would presumably be available to me as an answer to the more general question, thanks to my original first-personal interrogation. After all, only a rational animal is capable of thinking about what it is.

This seems undeniable. But the argument, at least as it stands, does not favor the strong reading of the venerable thesis. For, the “rational” in rational animal that is available to me by the very posing of the question “What am I?,” and subsequently the question, “What is a human being?” could very well be the rationality that is one capacity among others, and not the very form or essence of my being. It hardly follows from the fact that my rational power is *called upon* in grappling with a question about what it is that I am that my essence *consists in* my rational power.

Consider Heidegger, for whom the question – what, or rather who, am I? – is central to his project in *Being and Time*. He introduces his very term for human beings, “Dasein,” as picking out the ones for whom inquiring, particularly inquiring into its own way of being, is one of its essential possibilities.<sup>26</sup> Heidegger notes that asking the self-reflective ontological question is an exercise of one’s power to *question*, which he considers distinctively human. He would also, as I read him, grant that the power to question has important links to our power of reason. However, on Heidegger’s view, it is care, and ultimately temporality – not rationality – that most fundamentally captures the distinctively human, even if rationality

belongs in the picture. How rationality is to be placed within this broader and more fundamental characterization of the distinctively human is a wide open and indeed pressing exegetical question.<sup>27</sup> The point here is that one can, like Heidegger, accept that rationality belongs in the picture, thanks in part to our power of self-interrogation, without granting it the status of *the* core element.

## Notes

1 I thank Hubert Dreyfus for helpful conversation in Berkeley and John McDowell for helpful conversation in Berlin. For their productive reactions, I thank audiences at Reading – especially Severin Schroeder and Noa Leibowitz – and at the London meeting of the American Society for Existential Philosophy – especially Wayne Martin and Mark Wrathall. The participants at the workshop on the exchange at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin provided invaluable discussion, for which I am grateful. I take my title question from Dreyfus’s essay “Detachment, Involvement, and Rationality: Are we Essentially Rational Animals?”

2 Robert Brandom draws the distinction as follows:

This evaluative or comparative normative dimension of rationality rests on a conceptually prior constitutive one. The constitutive issue concerns whether one is a rational creature at all, rather than whether one is better or worse, more or less reliable, at doing what rational beings as such do...It is only creatures that are in the space of reason in this sense – ones for whom the question of what attitudes they have reason to adopt and what they have reason to do arises, or to whom demands for reasons are appropriately addressed – that are then further assessable as to how sensitive they are in fact to their reasons, how good they are at actually doing what they have good reason to do. *Reason in Philosophy*, p. 3

3 I owe this formulation to John McDowell, a version of which he offered in conversation in Berlin. This distinction between the two readings of the venerable thesis does not correspond to a related distinction drawn by Matthew Boyle between “additive theories” of rationality and “transformative theories” of rationality in his “Additive Theories of Rationality.” The weak reading, as I am presenting it, is not committed to rationality as something “tacked on” to an existing stock of other capacities (e.g. perception) to which it is at most externally related.

4 McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 46.

5 Dreyfus, in conclusion to chapter 1 of this volume, p. 000 (my emphasis).

6 What premise(s) might be added to make the original argument valid? One candidate premise: experience, or “sensibility,” can bear one and only one kind of content. Another candidate premise: the role and significance of experience in human life is exhausted by its contribution to rational knowledge of objective reality. McDowell, however, puts forward neither of these premises, so far as I know.

7 McDowell, “Responses,” p. 283.

8 McDowell, “What Myth?,” p. 349.

9 McDowell, this volume, p. 000.

10 Dreyfus, this volume, p. 000.

11 Dreyfus, “Response to McDowell,” p. 372.

12 *Pace* the tradition of philosophers, from Aristotle’s metaphysical opponent the Megarics to David Hume, who deny the validity of the distinction.

13 Kenny, *Metaphysics of Mind*, p. 69.

14 Ryle, *Concept of Mind*, p. 18.

15 McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 52.

16 Two small remarks about the argument are worth noting. One might think, as Dreyfus used to think (see his APA Presidential Address, “Overcoming the Myth of the Mental”), that this conclusion is a way of recognizing our kinship with nonhuman animals and how they comport themselves in their respective environments. Or one might think, as Dreyfus has come to think (see chapter 1 of this volume), that skilful, absorbed coping is distinctively human, and that McDowell’s stress on rationality as the distinctively human is a



tired “Athenian” prejudice that we should learn to get beyond. While the conclusion of the argument here is, strictly speaking, consistent with either of these positions, I believe Dreyfus’s later view of the status of absorbed coping is a positive development, or at least makes for a more interesting debate with McDowell. So I will treat the question about how we should understand the distinctively human as what is at stake in the presented argument in what follows. Second remark: “Determinate” can be read less robustly as “determinable” without changing the argument for our purposes. So McDowell’s anti-Brandomian stress, in his exchange with Dreyfus, on the point that that we need not have labels or names for every aspect of our experience for that experience to be conceptual in nature (“nameable”) is irrelevant to the argument.

17 Haugeland, “Truth and Rule-Following,” p. 325.

18 Kant, at B72 of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (among other places), distinguishes finite sensible intuition from infinite originary intuition. Infinite intuition creates or produces its objects. Finite intuition, by contrast, is given its objects from without, and thereby must be affected by objects to know them. So whereas an infinite intellect is wholly self-sufficient, a finite intellect is dependent on existing objects that are, for the intuiting subject, *other* than it and *already there*. For an account of Heidegger’s conception of the finitude of understanding as an elaboration of this sense of Kantian finitude, see my essay “Historical Finitude.”

19 See, for example, Lecture 2 of the McDowell’s Woodbridge Lectures, “The Logical Form of an Intuition,” at p. 41 of the reprinted version in *Having the World in View*.

20 Ibid., p. 41.

21 McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 27.

22 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §74, p. 47.

23 Heidegger makes several misleading remarks early in *Being and Time* that suggest he is committed to a contemplative conception of judging. I relieve him of this in my “Judgment and Ontology in Heidegger’s Phenomenology.”

24 Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behavior*, pp.168 - 69.

25 Matthew Boyle offered a version of this argument in conversation at the Wissenschaftskolleg workshop in Berlin.

26 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 27. I am grateful to Stephen Mulhall for reminding me of this passage.

27 *Pace* Dreyfus, Heidegger believes that the “Greek definition” of man as a rational animal is “not indeed false,” but it covers over the ground which makes our rationality possible. See *Being and Time*, p. 165/08. I discuss Heidegger and the problem of reason in my book manuscript, *Horizons of Intentionality: From Husserl to Heidegger*.

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