



Title	The phenomenology of everyday expertise and the emancipatory interest
Authors(s)	O'Connor, Brian
Publication date	2013-11-01
Publication information	O'Connor, Brian. "The Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise and the Emancipatory Interest." Sage, November 1, 2013. https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453713498388 .
Publisher	Sage
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/9292
Publisher's statement	O' Connor, B., The phenomenology of everyday expertise and the emancipatory interest, Philosophy and Social Criticism, 39 (9) pp. 921-933. Copyright © 2013 (Sage). Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.
Publisher's version (DOI)	10.1177/0191453713498388

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The Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise and the Emancipatory Interest

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Abstract

This is a critical theoretical investigation of Hubert Dreyfus' 'phenomenology of everyday expertise' (PEE). Operating mainly through the critical perspective of the 'emancipatory interest' the article takes issue with the contention that when engaged in expert action human beings are in non-deliberative, reason-free absorption. The claim of PEE that absorbed actions are not amenable to reconstruction places those actions outside the space of reasons. The question of acting under the wrong reasons – the question upon which the emancipatory interest rests – is thereby rendered groundless. A further difficulty for the emancipatory interest is the elimination by PEE of reflective agency. Framing expert action as perception- and affordance-driven, PEE diminishes practical reasoning. Furthermore, it understands freedom – consistently with its notion of action as affordance – as primarily the capacity of human beings to submit themselves to processes rather than to step back reflectively from them. Several criticisms of the philosophical delimitations created by methodology of PEE – phenomenology – are also developed.

In his efforts to reconceptualize the theory of reification Axel Honneth adopts a number of John Dewey's ideas in order to develop a division between "an original" or "single" or "immediate" "qualitative experience" and the "analytic" or "retroactive" or "reflexive" relation to that experience. This division is important to him in his effort to establish "that recognition enjoys both a genetic and a conceptual priority over cognition" (Honneth 2008: 40). Reification, according to Honneth, appears when the cognitive prevails over the recognitive in the development of human individuals. I want to explore, from a critical theoretical perspective, the implications of the fundamental thought which facilitates Honneth's and others' division of experience. I label that thought *the interruption thesis*, the thesis that analysis is essentially an interruption of experience. My

* 'The Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise and the Emancipatory Interest', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 39, No. 9 (2013) (pp. 915-927)

main objective is to show that this thesis stands in opposition to what I take to be an understanding of human behavior requisite for the normative enterprise of critical theory.

There are different ways of interpreting the reflective interruption of experience, ranging from dualistic claims that the analytical act in no way captures the experiential act to – and Honneth’s position is an instance of this – the claim that cognition can sympathetically interrupt original experience if, to use Honneth’s words, “the act of cognition or detached observation remains conscious of its dependence on an antecedent act of recognition” (Honneth 2008: 56).

But the interruption thesis, I want to argue, leaves us with an insuperable difficulty in explaining practical reason. By practical reasoning I am referring the fallible enterprise of clarifying for ourselves our reasons for why we acted and how we intend to act. To posit oneself as a practical reasoner is to take oneself to be a being who can act under reasons that can be articulated and defended or even renounced. One can deliberate on what should guide one’s actions and reflect on the practical reasoning, if any, that directed actions already undertaken. Practical reason, framed in this way, is a cognitive activity: it is reflective or analytical. The adherents of the interruption thesis must dispute that practical reason *qua* cognitive act can be operative in original experience. Their thesis entails a denial that practical reason is present all along and that reflection is simply a matter of separating out a rational core from original experience. They see reflective practical reason as retrojection, that is, as retroactively according reasons to behavior that was not originally reason-motivated. But that leaves us with a picture of agents, in original experience, as operating apparently without reasons. I not only think this can be shown to be a fallacious picture of human action, but that it must in principle be of concern to critical theory.

Informing this concern is what Habermas thematized as the “emancipatory interest.”¹ As critical theory consistently argues, our theoretical investigations into human experience are never, ultimately, a matter of pure theory in spite of the objectivist language of theory. A critical attitude framed by the emancipatory interest holds that objective theory

itself cannot but be guided by a normative attitude. The ways we seek to represent the relationship between the constitutive elements of experience express a conception of human beings and the degree to which we are tied or otherwise to the environment. But those representations also construct that relationship. If we are committed to the idea that our current social arrangements are neither necessary nor natural then we will wish to reject any account of human experience which cannot facilitate an emancipatory opportunity, i.e. any account which either ties us naturally and irretrievably to the environment or leaves the structures of our relationship to the environment opaque. The idea that human experience can be represented as cognitive, only after the fact, undermines, I shall argue here, the critical effort to understand what beliefs, what reasons, and what norms an agent lives through, placing action outside reason and therefore outside critique. A state-of-affairs which is closed off in this way is also one which denies criticism informed by the emancipatory interest.

I want to draw out the fullest implications of the interruption thesis by looking at a recent innovation not within critical theory but within phenomenology, the phenomenology of everyday expertise (hereafter PEE) of Hubert Dreyfus as it is perhaps the most thoroughgoing version of the interruption thesis in contemporary philosophy. It is conceived primarily as a contribution to embodiment theory, articulating its key claims, as we shall see, against, the alleged mentalism of conceptualist philosophy. If there are critical theoretical reasons for a rejection of PEE they cannot be directed against the notion of embodiment *per se*. The notion of embodied experience has been under-theorized by the broad critical theory tradition (though obviously not by feminist critical theory). Yet it will appear almost self-evident that critical theory should be attracted to some version of embodiment theory in that the latter seeks to explain an array of positive and critical ideas, a great many of which are directly pertinent to critical theory's classical agenda. If we think of critical theory as a variety of historical materialism the relevance of the notion of embodied experience comes into relief. Historical materialist philosophy in its opposition to the privileging of spirit requires a theory of action which demonstrates that the separation of the agent from her material capacities distorts and diminishes her agency. Moreover, in so far as historical materialism defines itself –

contra idealism – as a critique of suffering it takes the quality of embodied experience as a key normative index of those social arrangements which allow suffering to happen. A further dimension of embodied experience of significance to critical theory is the rejection of mind-body dualism. Critical theory has a practical interest in rejecting that dualism in that it is a dualism that supports the assumption that there is some feature of human existence that could be placed outside the conditions of social influence. To proceed with normative political theory with that assumption is to begin with ideals that simply do not capture the various distortions in human behavior produced by social arrangements. These arrangements become invisible to those who conceive of human experience as operating above societal forces. Ideal theory, in contrast with critical theory, is based on an idealization of human detachment from history. As Elizabeth Anderson formulates it: “The epistemic infirmity of ideal theory arises from the fact that if one hasn’t anticipated that an injustice of a certain form may arise, one may fail to represent the ideal state as one that essentially lacks that injustice, and may even allow that injustice to be unwittingly incorporated into the ideal state” (Anderson 2009: 135). What critical theory can develop from embodiment theory is a conception of human situatedness that deepens the complexity of its non-ideal starting point.

For critical theory, the range of implications of supposed material detachment – dualism – is wide: a naïveté about freedom (we are unfettered), a historical obliviousness (we are unconditioned), a disinterest in merely physical suffering (we seek spiritual gratification). We can find those concerns captured by the classical terminology of western Marxist social critique. The rejection of dualism is prompted by a worry about *alienation* – the tendency of individuals to see as separate from themselves what are in fact essential features of what they are (their work, their community, their human identity) – and also with *reification* – the tendency of individuals to see the world as nothing more than external things towards which they are instrumentally related.

It is tempting, in view of critical theory’s own under-theorization, to think that PEE might provide it with the concepts for a deeper consideration of the significance of embodiment. PEE seeks to develop an account of experience in which all traces of the old form of

subject-object dualism are overcome and in which the relation of the agent to her tasks is characterized in ways which are devoid of all instrumentalization. An effort to incorporate at least some of PEE's claims within critical theory will be discussed below. It is necessary to critically assess PEE, however, before we attempt to use it as a bridge between phenomenology and critical theory. If the form of embodiment for which it argues supports or even entrenches the interruption thesis then it runs against the emancipatory interest, as I want to show.

In this paper I shall set out Dreyfus' position on its own terms. Then I shall turn to a critical engagement with it, indicating, both what I take to be its internal philosophical limitations and its problematical rejection of precisely that feature of human experience upon which, as I shall argue, critical theory depends for its normative critique of human behavior. PEE denies that the experience of engaged practical reason – of *phronesis*, as it prefers to say – can in any sense be appropriately represented by referring to the reasons that an agent operates under. This, I contend, renders impossible a critical engagement with the practical reason of agents. The broader issue at stake in this critique is that of the rational content of experience. If experience is free of concepts, and therefore not available to a retrospective reconstruction of its reasons, then it is opaque and outside assessment and critique.

The Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise

A distinctive contribution by phenomenology to the mind-body problem has been to attempt to reconceive the nature of human experience in light of the “fact” of our embodiment. PEE is a trenchant formulation of that idea. For Dreyfus those philosophical accounts of experience that remain wedded to the notion that we are rule-following or normatively guided by rules have not fully understood the meaning of embodiment. They have clung on to the priority of the intellectual – in however attenuated a form – by positing “rules” as determinative of the content of experience. For Dreyfus they are guilty of the “myth of the mental.” Dreyfus' dispute is with John McDowell, in particular. McDowell has defended himself, with others joining the fray.² What is important for this paper, though, is not the Dreyfus-McDowell debate, but an assessment primarily of the

coherence and critical theoretical implications of Dreyfus' effort to bring about a completed theory of embodied action in which the relics of mentalism – concepts and rule-following – are finally abandoned.

Radicalizing aspects of the classical phenomenological movement Dreyfus explains engaged action not as a process of judgment, ratiocination or rule-following but as a matter of skilful coping. And precisely as experience that is not explained as judgment or conceptualization it does not suffer from the inherent constraints of the modern tradition which has been able to allow itself merely instrumental and manipulative or else purely naïve conceptions of experience which rely on a sharp contrast between the thinking agent and the world she is to act upon. Dreyfus develops his position by broadening what he understands by the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* to include any kind of expert action, in addition to moral action. As we shall see, it is essentially the absence of a differentiation between active moral agency and other kinds of “expert” performance that leads PEE into its principal difficulty: the de-rationalization of *phronesis* and the attendant exclusion of practical reason from it. *Phronesis* as a form of situated action seems well suited to the anti-mentalism of an embodied action theory. According to Dreyfus' interpretation *phronesis* is achieved skilled action which, in its operations, cannot be explained as the application of those rules or concepts which one acquired whilst learning the skill. Dreyfus puts it this way: “One can easily accept that in *learning* to be wise we learn to follow general reasons as guides to acting appropriately. But it does not follow that, once we have gotten past the learning phase, these *reasons* in the form of habits still *influence* our wise actions” (OMM 51). (It might be noted that in Dreyfus' work the terms “concepts” and “rules” are used interchangeably. While there are theories that connect the two – based on the normativity of concept employment – Dreyfus does not provide one.) When we have passed beyond learning, past the conscious rule-following phase, conscious rule following drops out of the experience.

An important specification for Dreyfus is that phronetic action is nonconceptual. By nonconceptual action – the experience of expert coping in everyday experience – Dreyfus means that experience is not a composition of implicit conceptual differentiations or

“nameable features,” as he puts it (OMM 55). Hence the content of expert action does not analyze down into conceptual elements. And therefore it does not analyze down to allegedly implicit rules that give it its form. Perception, rather than conceptualization, is, he claims, the operative process. Perception is sensitivity to the particularities of a situation, and it does not involve the question of which concepts or rules to apply. Citing Aristotle he writes: “*Phronesis*... involves knowledge of the ultimate particular thing, which cannot be attained by systematic knowledge but only by ‘perception’” (OMM 51). Perception is not a matter of seeing the conceptual relations in a situation, relations which might make normative demands on us: it is a nonconceptual process which contains only “motor intentional content” (RMM 360). A thought from Heidegger is used to explain this action motivating perceptive capacity, which Dreyfus paraphrases as follows: “most of our ethical life consists in simply seeing the appropriate thing to do and responding without deliberation...” (OMM 51). Perception in this sense operates spontaneously and immediately: it is, as just defined, a deliberation-free activity.

However, there is a prehistory to any individual’s capacity to act “perceptively.” And that is the socialization process in which one acquires the basic and framing norms pertinent to a particular skill. Dreyfus endorses McDowell’s account of this: “[t]hanks to our inculcation into our culture, we become sensitive to reasons, which then influence our ‘habits of thought and action’” (OMM 50). But mastery of a skill does not entail following good habits which are determined by reasons. Eventually reasons are not to be found in the content of our actions. As Dreyfus puts it: “*phronesis* shows that socialization can produce a kind of master whose actions do not rely on habits based on reasons to guide him” (OMM 51).

Mastery of a skill contrasts with mere competence in the execution of that skill. Dreyfus describes competence as: “Responding to the general type of situation, while monitoring what I am doing” (RMM 357). The organization of the workplace, we might interpolate, is geared towards maximal control of its own environment. In a controlled environment variables are reduced and judgment is therefore not demanded of the worker. The worker must thereby relate instrumentally to his tasks and the objects that are manipulated in that

process. Those tasks can never become a vehicle of self-fulfillment in that they are not permitted to be. Competence is sufficient: expertise is not even a possibility. The master, by contrast, is goal directed and acts flexibly, responsively, and sensitively within her tasks. The tasks are not undertaken as processes of rule-following, but through absorption. As Dreyfus puts it, the master at work is “[i]n flow, totally absorbed in responding to the unique shifting situation” (RMM 357). The master, then, is not constrained by the tasks, and the tasks – possibly – are completed in ways that bear the personality of the master.

Given that expert action must involve intelligence – the expert can hardly be ignorant of what she is doing – perception is characterized by Dreyfus as nonconceptual understanding. This notion *seems* to coincide with the efforts of certain strands of critical theory to set out a theory of action explicitly directed against the fetishism of reason, but which, nevertheless, does not represent an abandonment of reason. Reason, rather, is located in the process of the experience – dialectically – rather than in the application of preconceptions. Dreyfus, however, rejects such an interpretation of everyday expertise: he will not grant the presence of reason in everyday expertise. This issue emerges sharply in his account of how we are supposed to think of the action after the event. That is, what is the relation between the expertly performed original action and our explanation of that action? At the outset I noted that a feature of self-positing practical reasoners is that they take themselves to be the kinds of creatures who act under reasons that can be articulated and defended, or sometimes renounced. They reflect on actions in order to adduce the practical reasoning that directed or ought to direct them. But Dreyfus denies that we can “reconstruct” the reasons implicit within the original action. Reconstruction is appropriate where reasons are there to be recaptured. In expert action, however, we are not, according to PEE, reasoning our way through a process: “reasons play no role” (OMM 53), he states. And neither are there concepts – nameable features – in the original action that our explanation could in some sense revisit: “expert coping isn’t even implicitly rational in the sense of being responsive to reasons that have become habitual but could be reconstructed” (OMM 55). When we account for actions of the variety of everyday expertise we can provide only “construction.” This is retrojecting reasons into

those actions. The constructed reasons do not capture the content of the original action. One might think that what Dreyfus is excluding in his claim that reasons play no role are specific, objectifying senses of reason: e.g. procedural, strategic, instrumental. That, however, is not the direction of PEE. No form of reason, radicalized or otherwise, is operative in everyday expertise.

Dreyfus utilizes J. J. Gibson's notion of affordances to explain what it is in our environment that we are nonconceptually sensitive to when engaged in everyday expertise. Affordances are situation-specific and they "solicit" us to act in particular ways. But they are not conceptual features of a specific situation which might somehow inform implicit judgments about how to negotiate a task. Dreyfus stresses that affordances are not thought at all: "responding to affordances does not require noticing them. Indeed, to best respond to affordances (whether animal or social, prelinguistic or linguistic) one must not notice them *as* affordances, but, rather, as Heidegger says, they 'withdraw' and we simply 'press into' them" (OMM 56).³ He gives several examples of affordance behavior. To cite one: "This door does not simply afford going in and out but affords going in and out cautiously, and/or quickly, and/or silently, and/or unobtrusively, that is, in whatever way is called for by the whole situation" (OMM 56). The grammar of affordances – if it can be put that way – is not conceived as a deep conceptuality. It is pre-conceptual, non-rational and non-deliberative. Elsewhere, Dreyfus notes that affordances require experience and enculturation (Dreyfus 1999: 104). The transition to reflection interrupts our affordance-perception interaction with the world. From this we can see that Dreyfus' understanding of the relationship between experience and reflection sets up is a dualistic version of the interruption thesis. Everyday expertise is not captured if represented as a set of reasons. The business of giving reasons does not open up the content of experience and its motivations.

In the following section I want to develop several criticisms of PEE. And in the final section the implications of PEE for the emancipatory interest will be considered. Before turning to that, however, I want to indicate the promise that PEE seems to hold for at least one branch of critical theory. In a recent paper Lenny Moss and Veda Pavesich,

attempting to renew critical theory's productive engagement with anthropology, have developed what they call an "anthropology of detachment and compensation" (Moss and Pavesich 2011: 160). Their notion of detachment is grounded in the Freudian evolutionary thesis that a key stage in the development of the human species was a cessation of its instinctually immediate relation to the environment, an immediacy that continues to be characteristic of other animals (Moss and Pavesich 2011: 155). This detachment places human beings in tension with their environment. Socio-cultural activities are posited as the way in which the species has endeavored to reduce that tension: it is how, according to the hypothesis, human beings achieve compensation for the original detachment. Critical theory finds a place within this framework in exercising its classical concern with the form of the good life, or, to use the language of Moss and Pavesich's theory, in taking a critical view on the ways in which socio-cultural compensation is provided and structured. If the description of society and culture as a compensatory need is correct then critical theory may return to its original engagement with philosophical anthropology (an engagement from which it withdrew because of the associations with eugenics anthropology acquired during the period of National Socialism). By conceiving our socio-cultural constructions as driven by the compensatory need we can provide a theoretical basis for the critical-theoretical interest in "an ethics of flourishing" (Moss and Pavesich 2011: 160)

Moss and Pavesich hold that the anthropology of detachment and compensation has the potential to diagnose the deficiencies in the socio-cultural provision of compensatory needs. They write: "From the standpoint of an anthropologically informed Critical Theory that can go beyond the residua of neo-Kantian dualism and recover the dialectical intentions of the early Frankfurt School, the meaning of autonomy must be rediscovered from within the embodied, embedded, socially and materially dynamic contexts of our practical ecologies of compensation" (Moss and Pavesich 2011: 160). In theorizing that rediscovery the anthropology of detachment and compensation finds in PEE a congenial account of fulfilled activity, mastery. Mastery is the exemplar of compensation. Moss and Pavesich find many of the normative ideals of critical theory – placed now within an anthropological frame – addressed by PEE. They writes: "A skill, whether it be driving a

car, hammering a nail, playing a violin, or diagnosing a disease, is a vital connection between ourselves and a normatively structured world; it is our human form of compensation par excellence. To have a skill is already to take a stand and to have standing in the world. To have skill is to implicitly enjoy recognition; it is, in however large or small a measure, to have the wherewithal to provide oneself with grounding compensation – to be an active agent in the construction and participation of our shared normativity” (Moss and Pavesich 2011: 160-161). This conception of skilled acting can help us to formulate the pathologies of alienated labor and disrecognition in which the worker experiences himself as an object – not as a person recognized – as constrained by the task – and not autonomous. The contrast is between the master and the worker is one in which one party comes closer to socio-cultural compensation, whilst the other remains in tension with its environment.

Moss and Pavesich, I believe, concede too much to PEE. Driven more by philosophical anthropological considerations than critical theoretical ones they effectively endorse the interruption thesis which valorizes absorption – and idealizations of socio-cultural arrangement that provide for it – over deliberation and reflective detachment. In Criticisms II below I will discuss the consequences of the interruption thesis for our understanding of autonomy, contending that it ultimately fails to represent the distinctively human exercises of freedom. This will be seen to have obvious implications for a project – such as Moss and Pavesich’s – to align critical theory with PEE.

Criticisms I

I want to consider two purely philosophical problems that arise from Dreyfus’ dualization of the space of reasons and the space of engaged expertise. (1) *How do rules disappear?* Competent, self-conscious rule-following is, according to PEE, transformed into rule-free, nonconceptual perception at the stage of expertise. The rules drop away from the experience. But what exactly happens here? The disappearance is offered as a fact about human capacities, that there is a qualitative transition from one kind of engagement to another which bears no traces for the former. Dreyfus, however, seems to base this claim on phenomenological analysis. In Dreyfus’ discussion of the expert absorption is

stressed. Absorption, however, is a phenomenological description. What the description captures is limited by what is phenomenologically accessible. This raises an obvious question about the methodological delimitation of experience. Given the enormity of Dreyfus' claim, regarding the non-rule-governedness of behavior, he needs to discuss and defend his methodology. The mistake Dreyfus makes is a very substantial one: he turns a feature of experience (as analyzed by him) into a principle of philosophy. This is a philosophical mistake in itself and one, it might be noted, that has persistently troubled critical theory about phenomenology: it is that phenomenological methodology prevents us from looking behind experience and enquiring into the possibility that action and experience might actually be distorted by the social norms which habitually influence us. Phenomenological analysis, however, relies on the authority of first-person experience when investigating the constitution of experience. It takes appearance as all of reality.

The notion of absorption, in Dreyfus' use, is undifferentiated. This is a significant omission as it allows him to offer a non-deliberative characterization of the practical agent. Examples of sport are placed alongside considerations of *phronesis*. Even on phenomenological grounds this seems contentious in that the expert conduct of the latter is not obviously conducted without conscious, deliberative elements. That is, to be a *phronimos* is not a matter of being in "the zone" but is, in the exercise of autonomy, expertise in deliberation, in thinking through principles and consequences, often agonizingly. Dreyfus sees it quite otherwise, however: "But the mistaken idea that when the situation becomes complex an agent must deliberate – articulate his or her principles and draw conclusions as to how to act – only becomes dangerous when the philosopher reads the structure of deliberation back into the spontaneous response. This intellectualizes the phenomenon" (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1991: 238). The claim here is that we have absorbed practical first, and reflection – if at all – only when there is some problem with that action. That is not to say that a great deal of practical action is carried out without reflection, but it is not a mark of expertise that it always absorbed and non-deliberative. The case for the expulsion of reflection from practical action cannot be made by reference to particular congenial examples. Indeed even one of Dreyfus' preferred illustrations turns out to be less helpful than it seems to him. He writes: "When

the Grandmaster is playing lightning chess, as far as he can tell, he is simply responding to the patterns on the board. At this speed he must depend entirely on perception and not at all on analysis and comparison of alternatives” (OMM 53). We ask: do chess grandmasters not play “better” chess at ranking tournaments or at speed chess events? The answer is not in doubt. If there is a difference – if a higher level of skill is achieved with the use of more time – then Dreyfus’ notion of the phronimos acting “without deliberation” is problematic. At the tournament the Grandmaster will use the time to deliberate exercising his expertise in positional analysis.

(2) *Why, in moments of breakdown, do the formal rules return to us?* If we have severed ourselves from the learning phase in becoming masters, as Dreyfus thinks, there is no continuity between the initial phase and higher (master) phases. The character of phase one is competent rule following (conceptuality), whereas the higher phase is perceptual immediacy (unthought affordances). These are two quite different experiences. However, when things go wrong for the absorbed master she will commonly return to the rules of her practice. Why would she do that, though, unless she considered those rules relevant to the expert execution of her task? Why should the authoritative words of a teacher’s instructions, of a manual, or the learning process seem relevant in just that situation? The answer is obvious: the expert carries to a high level of skill – involving no doubt a power to adapt and innovate – the rules she has acquired. They form a frame within which her expert activities can be conducted. The notion that we switch between two heterogeneous phases, as PEE claims, appears to be an artificial, phenomenologically produced division. It leads us to think of the switch between phases as catastrophic and discontinuous.

Criticisms II

I want now to consider, more specifically, the various ways in which PEE acts against the emancipatory interest. As we have seen, Dreyfus argues that learned rules disappear once the action has become skilled. He insists that these rules are not at all implicit in some state of unacknowledged influence. Everyday expertise is, as we saw, a deliberation-free and thereby reasoning-free activity. (Interestingly, Gadamer, whom Dreyfus enlists does not see it quite that way. He writes, glossing Aristotle, that “in moral deliberation, seeing

what is immediately to be done is not a mere seeing but nous” [Gadamer 2003: 322].) Hence it is inappropriate to attempt to reconstruct actions of the everyday expertise type in terms of their rule-following content. The explanation of such actions will have to be satisfied with alien construction, not reconstruction since the action contains no retrievable “nameable features.” The quality of the construction cannot be measured against the original experience as that experience cannot be represented with the grammar of reasons. Rather oddly, construction comes to seem an idle game without truth conditions in which reasons are groundlessly presented.

The consequences of the non-reconstructability of our actions are deep, it seems, to me. Dreyfus, in his polemic against mentalism, effectively dualizes the space of actions and the space of reasons: what a person did in everyday expertise type actions cannot be reconstructed; the actions a person undertook in responding to the “unique shifting situation” in the manner of everyday expertise cannot be specified. Once interrupted it can never be accurately represented in terms of “reasons.” That leads us directly to the thesis of the inaccessibility of those actions to reasons. That inhibits the kind of normative evaluation of the actions that I discussed at the beginning of this paper.

The allegation that Dreyfus’ position dualistically seals off the space of action from that of reasons might seem contestable. After all, the actor is hardly unaware of what he is doing and the action must, of course, be purposive. He must understand his responsibility within the situation to be a contribution to achieving the purpose. Dreyfus’ position, however, is compelled to deny this. To quote an even more forthright formulation of the nonconceptual/non-rule-following thesis by Dreyfus: “speaking of a reconstruction, rather than a construction, of reasons suggests that these reasons must have been implicit all along, whereas, for Heidegger, the *phronimos*’s actions are not in the space of reasons at all” (OMM 51). (Dreyfus, it might be noted, did not always endorse Heidegger on this controversial claim.⁴) If there is a third space, neither propositionally structured nor irrational⁵, then a wholly new theory – for which Dreyfus does not offer the rudiments – is called for.

The implications for the emancipatory question come into particularly sharp relief when Dreyfus attempts to handle the question of freedom. Whilst Dreyfus has no overt ambition to erode or restrict the possibilities of freedom the fact that his PEE does so indicates the inherent limitations of the theory. There is a position – identified by Dreyfus with McDowell and Gadamer – which holds that it is an essential capacity of human beings to be freely “able to step back from their environment and perceive and think about the world” (RMM 355). This is obviously a standard view which entails the further idea that processes of reflection inform the activities that one might go on to undertake, even as one undertakes them: actions can be marked by the determinations of one’s reflections. Freedom, in this account, is a rational activity, geared as it is towards the regulation and evaluation of behavior. Dreyfus, however, claims that this conception does not capture the radicality of our freedom. Enlisting Heidegger he states: “Heidegger sees as essential the fact that human beings are free to open themselves to being bound – a freedom that animals lack because they are constantly captivated by their current activity and can never step back...” (RMM 355). So whilst the traditional view is that freedom involves a reflective act of *stepping back from*, Dreyfus sees it also and more importantly as an act of *stepping back into*. Dreyfus claims that when *we step back from* engaged experience we achieve only competence (rule-following). He is thinking here only of some kind of reflective analysis of how to do something: yet we might regard reflective analysis on how to act as better people, of how to make our behavior more consistent with the moral laws that we respect, as a valuable use of our freedom. It is in boundedness, though – *stepping back into* – that expert coping is to be achieved. He does not mention that freedom might also have something to do with choosing what one ought to do.

The boundedness Dreyfus discusses is phenomenologically similar to animal coping. As Dreyfus says, without realizing its self-destructiveness, “I’d like to convince you that we... can profit from a phenomenological analysis of the nonconceptual embodied coping skills we share with animals and infants” (OMM 47). (Affordance behavior is “alike” in animals, infants and adults.). The problem, of course, is that the animal is unlikely to have undergone the process of rule acquisition and enculturation that Dreyfus

had allowed as the prehistory of everyday expertise. The bizarreness of Dreyfus' thesis is that as we move from learning, through competence and finally to expertise we approach animal forms of coping. This, however, is consistent with his theory, and points, again, to its artificiality. Everyday expertise is – as is, presumably, the animal's coping – deliberation-free. We experience our engaged actions as the animals do. Those actions are characterized as neither free nor unfree. Freedom lies elsewhere, outside engaged action. Freedom is to be found only in the act of deciding to withdraw from everyday expertise and perform merely competently or else “letting ourselves be drawn to re-enter our involved expert coping” (RMM 355).

But the freedom which we exercise when we decide to *step back into* expert coping effectively commits us to the loss of agency and autonomy that we experience very explicitly when we reflect on what we should do: we commit ourselves to processes of experience that contain no element of deliberation. And without deliberation there can be no self-determination, instead, simply the nonconceptual, non-rational execution of a task. The politics of this position are alarming. A notion of freedom as a kind of re-materialization of the much criticized hypostatized self might seem to be of significance to critical theory if what that materialization involves is its reintegration with context and history. In the form in which Dreyfus deals with it, however, it is plainly irrational: freedom, in the highest sense, means submission to unreflecting engagement. It just happens to be the ideal of the uncritical, totally integrated member of a social totality. When we think of this description of experience as supposedly applicable to active moral agency its inadequacy is obvious enough. It asks us, as we have seen, to believe that moral expertise proceeds without deliberation.

The antagonism of PEE to the “emancipatory interest” should now be apparent: its conception of accomplished action extinguishes the agent if not altogether, then at least as a kind of reflective self-determining individual. Dreyfus' picture so embodies the agent – depriving her of all conceptuality and reason in the sense above – that there remains no viable conception of an agent as a being undertaking rationally infused processes. The agent's action cannot be understood in terms of reasons (good or bad).

The question of acting under the wrong reasons – the question upon which the emancipatory interest rests – is thereby rendered groundless. For that reason critical theory must reject Dreyfus’ PEE and exercise extreme caution in attempting to accommodate itself to any version of the interruption thesis in which the space of reason is divided from the space of engaged experience.

I will conclude by summarizing the various critical-theoretical difficulties with PEE:

- (i) It places a significant realm of conscious human action, most significantly practical agency, beyond the space of reasons;
- (ii) It eliminates reflective agency, and thereby autonomy;
- (iii) It construes an accomplished and acquired skill as of the same species as animal behavior, despite the absence of any normative prior rule acquisitions by animals;
- (iv) It turns freedom in the highest sense into the capacity to be bound to nature, not to raise oneself from it;
- (v) Its conclusions are produced by its methodology: phenomenology. But the supposed absence of a phenomenology of rule following in undifferentiated absorption is not really decisive in settling the question of whether we are rule guided or not.

Notes

¹ Jürgen Habermas: “...as long as philosophy remains caught in ontology, it is itself subject to an objectivism that disguises the connection of its knowledge with the human interest in autonomy and responsibility” (Habermas 2008: 261-262).

² See McDowell 2007 and McManus 2007.

³ In this regard, Dreyfus appears to have dropped a distinction he established in an earlier paper: “For Heidegger what sets human beings apart from all animals is that they are ultimately motivated by a need to take a stand on their being. In Heidegger’s famous example one exercises the skill of hammering in order to fasten pieces of wood together towards building a house, but ultimately for the sake of being a carpenter. That is, what ultimately motives all learning and all action according to Heidegger is that only through action does one get an identity, and having an identity, a way to be, is what human being is all about. For Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, as we shall see, human action, like animal action, is, at its most basic level motivated by a need to get a grip on the world” (Dreyfus 1999: 119).

⁴ Here is a more plausible claim: “Getting deliberation right is half of what phenomenology has to contribute to the study of ethical expertise. One should not conclude from the pervasiveness of egoless, situation-governed, comportment, that thought is always disruptive and inferior.

Heidegger seems to make this mistake in *Being and Time* when he says that thematic cognizing is a deficient mode of concern” (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1991: 240).

⁵ This is Lenny Moss’ helpful expression.

Abbreviations used

OMM Dreyfus, H. L. (2005). “Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise.” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 79, No. 2.

RMM Dreyfus, H. L. (2007). “The Return of the Myth of the Mental.” *Inquiry*, Vol. 50, No. 4.

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