CONCEPTUALITY OF UNREFLECTIVE ACTIONS IN FLOW: 
ON THE MCDOWELL-DREYFUS DEBATE

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CONCEPTUALITY OF UNREFLECTIVE ACTIONS IN FLOW: 
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The objective of this essay is to supplement Gabriel Gottlieb’s challenge to Hubert Dreyfus, who claims that concepts are not operative in an expert’s actions when he is in a state of flow. To achieve this objective, I argue the following: First, concepts become deeply rooted for experts through practice, starting from novelty through the expertise stage. As such, it is contrary to common sense for rooted concepts to become inoperative just when it is time for the agent to put them to use in his state of flow, or the zone. Second, agent’s report that he is unaware of conceptual reflections while in a state of flow, does not by itself prove that concepts are non-operational during flow actions. Alternatively, inability to recall reasons behind actions during flow can be a consequence of either or both of the following: (i) adequacy of the agent’s minimized reflections on his rooted concepts; and (ii) the agent’s maximum concentration on his successful performance rather than misallocation of mental capacities to memorizing reasons behind his step-by-step flow actions. Third, examples are offered such as the agent’s retrospective self-reviews supporting the operations of concepts during his flow actions, e.g., reviews of video replays of tournaments.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read “Conceptuality of Unreflective Actions in Flow: On the McDowell-Dreyfus Debate” by Ali Tasdighi Far, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Art in Philosophy at San Francisco State University.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The goal of this essay is to augment Gabriel Gottlieb's view in support of John McDowell, opposing Hubert Dreyfus's claim, that concepts are not operative during an expert's unreflective actions.¹ An expert's testimony, about neither being aware of concepts nor recalling reasons² behind his actions, is insufficient to prove that concepts are inoperative when he is acting in the zone.³ In the following sections, I will argue that being unaware of reasons behind one's actions in the zone could likely be a consequence of the expert's minimized reflections on his deep-rooted concepts. Moreover, it is plausible that not recalling every reason behind an expert's actions is a consequence of his maximum concentration on processing and coordinating his activity to achieve expert level performance, rather than wastefully committing his mental capacities to reflect and remember the reasons behind his step-by-step actions when he is performing in the zone.

To achieve the objectives of this essay, I begin with a brief account of concepts and shall follow up with more details in section II-B. Dreyfus and McDowell (with Gottlieb on McDowell's side) are in agreement in the most part with Kant who remarked that concepts are rules⁴ produced by the faculty of understanding. The exercises of rules or concepts constitute warranted judgments about the world.⁵ For Kant, concepts work in tandem with intuitions:

If the receptivity of our mind, its power of receiving representations in so far as it is in any wise affected, is to be entitled sensibility, then the mind's power of producing representations from itself, the spontaneity of knowledge, should be
called the understanding. Our nature is so constituted that our intuition can never be other than sensible; that is, it contains only the mode in which we are affected by objects. The faculty, on the other hand, which enables us to think the object of sensible intuition is the understanding. To neither of these powers may a preference be given over the other. With our sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.6

McDowell interprets this to mean that concepts and intuitions are in interplay even at the level of experience. Although “experiences are passive states or occurrences.” 7 they nevertheless do show “conceptual capacities of the kind that in operation belong to spontaneity…and they inextricably combine receptivity and spontaneity.”8 As such, “conceptual capacities belong to spontaneity, which are already at work in experiences themselves, not just in judgements based on them.”9 Because experiences are furnished with conceptual content, they can be justificatory. Moreover, the “joint involvement of receptivity and spontaneity allows us to say that in experience (equipped with conceptual content) one can take-in how things are.”10 Dreyfus does not have this view of experience, and his account of reflections on concepts are different from McDowell’s. A key point of difference between Dreyfus and McDowell is that Dreyfus claims there are no concepts and no judgment without reflections.11 (e.g., there are no concepts operating on an agent acting in flow when he neither remembers nor reports awareness of reflecting on any concepts). For him, reflections are as cognitive processes involved in the retrieval and processing of relevant concepts, including explanations and analysis and comparisons of
alternatives. Conversely, for McDowell concepts are in action, they exist pre-reflectively, and are intertwined in our experience (e.g., seeing a table as a table is a perceptual activity wherein concepts are operative with no explicit reflection.) Gottlieb defines reflections as the “activity of comparing and analyzing information received through perceptual experiences.” He relies on McDowell’s view that concepts exist without reflection and that concepts permeate our experiences.

Next, I provide a summary of Dreyfus’s claim that the phenomenon of embodied coping reveals that expert actions are primarily non-conceptual and unreflective. According to Dreyfus, an expert is at his best when he is acting in the flow, which does not involve mental representations, planning, or conceptual activity. Dreyfus purports that in flow actions which are unreflective, embodied skills and know-how perform the role of reflection, but Dreyfus posits that novices reflect on concepts (i.e., concepts operate in actions of novices).

Then, I review McDowell’s opposing assertions that mature embodied coping is permeated with conceptual mindedness, and that an expert’s perceptions, experiences, and actions including flow actions are conceptual all the way down.

After presenting a summary of the McDowell-Dreyfus debate, I provide a synopsis of Gottlieb’s position that practical concepts and unreflective intelligence (in lieu of perceptual concepts) operate in expert’s unreflective actions, which is contrary to Dreyfus’s view.
Lastly, I offer additional reinforcement to defend the conceptuality of unreflective actions to supplement Gottlieb's position by providing the following arguments: First, concepts that an agent develops over time with practice, starting from the stage of novelty, become deeply rooted and persist in his expertise stage. It is against common sense to insist that the expert's deep-rooted concepts disappear just when he puts them to work in flow action.

Second, instead of Dreyfus's characterization of the operations of concepts on an agent's actions (or his reflections on concepts) as having an all-to-nothing or off-to-on trajectory, there is an alternative view. I suggest that concepts and reflections on concepts operate on an agent's actions in shades of gray, ranging for example from deep-rooted to shallow-rooted or from few to many concepts. Moreover, an agent's reflections can modulate between maximal to minimal, when he may need to spend more time to slowly and intensely reflect on concepts (e.g., maximal reflection on new or shallow rooted concepts) or rapid reflection on concepts (e.g., minimal reflection on familiar and deep-rooted concepts) in action. All else equal, the strengths of an agent's concepts and concentration are inversely proportional to the intensity of his reflections. For example, a novice athlete, with under-developed concepts and weaker concentration skills, needs to reflect slowly and more intensely on more concepts when he plays in a game. Conversely, an expert athlete, with more deep-rooted concepts and sharper concentration skills, may find it sufficient to perform expertly by engaging in more rapid and minimal reflections on
his deep-rooted concepts, as compared to that of a novice. An expert adapts and conditions himself to expend his mental capacities to attain optimal performance for a given task. Expert’s deep-rooted concepts enable him to sharply concentrate on performing expertly to achieve his flow action’s goals, instead of wastefully, slowly, and intensely reflect on concepts so he can remember to report reasons behind his step-by-step actions, as would a novice. Therefore, even from Dreyfus’s vantage point but contrary to his conclusion, an expert’s faint but fast reflections on concepts can be a more plausible explanation for how he may faintly notice or recall concepts in flow action.

Third, Dreyfus asserts that reflection on concepts re-emerge, only after the expert’s state of flow is disrupted. When experts are in the state of flow, thinking about actions degrades their performance from expert level to competency, and thus concepts have no use in an expert’s flow activities, according to Dreyfus. Moreover, he holds that only after concepts and reasoning are relinquished can one’s expertise be fully directed toward his activity. Again, even accepting Dreyfus’s view on reflections and concepts in action at face value, an expert’s reflections and concentration can modulate from minimum to maximum depending on a task’s goals and difficulty. While maximally concentrating on the task at hand, an expert minimally reflects on his deep-rooted concepts. This is because minimal reflections are sufficient when things are going well, not because concepts are disruptive, inoperative, or have no use in flow actions. Moreover, at the moment an agent’s flow actions are disrupted, his conceptual reflective actions return with immediacy,
intensity, and involuntarily. If concepts were inoperative in flow actions (as Dreyfus purports) then how could concepts re-dominate our actions with such force and speed, involuntarily, after a flow action disturbance? Concepts, at the threshold of flow action, dominating our actions with such immediacy and intensity, reinforces the view that concepts not only persist but also that they persist with strength, in flow actions, despite the agent's inability to explicitly notice or recall them.

Fourth, skilled agents in flow, reliably and consistently, navigate through textured and complicated circumstances and respond to surprises and irregularities, which by itself disclosed the rootedness of concepts and its operation in flow action.

Fifth, Abundance of expert testimonies and peer reviews relating to the use of concepts to strategize and review actions before, during, and after a game supports the operation of concepts during flow actions. Also, agent's demonstrations of flow actions do support McDowell view on demonstrative concepts. For example, instead of an agent explaining "that is why I did what I did, and that is how I did it step-by-step", agent can say: "I did that" (and point to it).

Sixth, there are alternative conceptual-friendly explanations for the examples that Dreyfus offers, which could include Knoblauch's emotions such as his anxiety, worry, or insecurity about his game that interfered with his concentration and disrupted his flow in the game, and not Knoblauch's over-analysis.
In the next section, I summarize the McDowell-Dreyfus debate relating to operations of concepts in unreflective actions, as well as a summary of Gottlieb’s view in support of McDowell’s position.

II. ON THE McDOWELL-DREYFUS DEBATE: EMPHASIS ON UNREFLECTIVE ACTIONS

In this section, I first recap Dreyfus’s view that unreflective actions are non-conceptual. Next, I outline McDowell’s view that disagrees with Dreyfus on the grounds that mature or expert level embodied coping is permeated with conceptual mindedness. Finally, I summarize Gottlieb’s view who supports McDowell by positing that expert level unreflective actions, generally performed in speed, are a form of non-reflective intelligence and as such are conceptual.

A. DREYFUS’ VIEW: UNREFLECTIVE ACTIONS ARE NON-CONCEPTUAL

Dreyfus asserts that McDowell commits himself to the Myth of the Mental by “presuming that a linguistic and conceptual deconstruction of any clear divide between mind and world teaches us that perception is conceptual all the way out.”17 Moreover, he objects to McDowell’s view that “actions are conceptual all the way down,”18 and that our “embodied coping is permeated with mindedness.”19 Dreyfus claims that we have non-conceptual, non-propositional, non-rational, and non-mental embodied coping skills, some of which we share with pre-linguistic infants and higher order animals.20 Embodied coping is not the experience of the mind open to and grasping facts about the world but rather the
body responding to solicitations. Dreyfus views much of our encounters with the world as being in total absorption by way of embodied coping and being in a state of flow, when we cease to be a subject altogether.21 Moreover, when we are in the state of flow “there is no experience of an object and so no object to bring under a concept.”22

Following the phenomenological positions of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Dreyfus holds that we have the capacity to engage in many complex or simple embodied actions when we get in the zone where we can skillfully respond to our world without thinking.23 When we are in the zone, affordances and solicitations mindlessly draw us into embodied copings and actions without the operation of concepts. In practice, Dreyfus views mindedness as the enemy of embodied coping.24 We plan beforehand and initiate, but when we are in the zone of the activity, we do not experience an ego doing it.25 In skillful mindless coping, we are at our best when we unreflectively get absorbed in a space that solicits a certain activity.26 Dreyfus uses the example of a blitz chess player who operates in speed, as in the zone type action, when the player has no time to think.27 He characterizes the chess player as one who does not think, but just responds to the patterns on the board; being drawn to act, the chess player does what needs to be done.28 According to Dreyfus, we engage the world by way of our skillful body, responding to affordances in a certain way and reacting to solicitations, such as pulling an arm toward a doorknob and not a coffee mug, moving a bishop and not a queen, throwing a curve-ball to a batter at home plate and not to second base.29 Our bodily skillfulness responds to our surroundings
as a field of "meaningfully configured situations that solicit some responses and repels others, and our bodily comportments are attuned to these solicitations." Dreyfus's view on solicitation is different from affordances. Solicitation is not just a fact about an object but a motivation to act, such as being attracted to an apple when I am hungry, and as such for Dreyfus, solicitations are neither rational nor conceptual. Because we are open to the world's solicitations, the world is "the totality of interconnected solicitations that attract or repulse us" and our openness to it is not grounded on rationality.

Dreyfus posits that to attain the status of an expert (skilled) perceiver or agent, one does not involve the internalization of such concepts or reflections, but instead short-circuits them by "developing a direct bodily responsiveness to the overall configuration of a situation." In order to retain our freedom from the causal world and keep our spontaneity, Dreyfus argues that in absorbed mindless coping, we are free because we choose to respond (to being bound or not) in the flow activity.

We have the capacity to interrupt our bodily absorption in the flow, which enables us to step back and reflect, and then our self-consciousness re-emerges, according to Dreyfus. Like Heidegger, Dreyfus sees human beings as "free to open themselves to being bound, a freedom that animals lack because they are constantly captivated by their current circumstances and can never step back." When we are absorbed in everyday skillful
coping, we may well have the capacity to step back and reflect, but we may not be able to exercise that capacity without disrupting our coping.36

For Dreyfus, “in expert unreflective actions, embodied skills and know-how play the role of reflection, and conceptuality play in action of novices.”37 Reflections must be involved for concepts to contribute to experience.38 Dreyfus holds that reflecting and monitoring what we are doing as we are doing it, leads to a performance that is at best competent, and only after abandoning monitoring our activity, can we regain our expertise.

In summary, where actions are concerned, Dreyfus views two separate ways of being open to the world: the conceptual (which is reflective) and the non-conceptual (which is non-reflective) way. In his approach, neither perceptual concepts nor practical concepts operate in flow action. “The conceptual way in its pure form describes what happens when one confronts a difficult situation, steps back, figures out what to do, and then responds competently.”39 Our consciousness may be called into action if there is a disruption, when our mind detects something has gone wrong.40 But, in so far as “one is an expert in any domain and when things are going well (when he is in the zone), one responds directly and transparently to the situation’s demands mindlessly” and he remains free to choose to be bound in the zone or free himself from it, at all times.41
B. McDowell’s View: Expert’s Embodied Coping is Permeated with Conceptual Mindedness

Before reviewing McDowell’s arguments against Dreyfus, a brief accounting of McDowell’s views on perception (including practical perception) is provided.

Broadly speaking, McDowell has a holistic view on concepts where battery of concepts are interconnected in a unified manner, and they are drawn into experience, including in our perceptions. As noted earlier, an agent’s perception is conceptual and at its onset the product of his sensibility’s receptivity and understanding’s spontaneity. “Experiences are impressions made by the world on our senses, and are products of receptivity; but those impressions themselves have conceptual content.”\(^4^2\) As such, “experiences are states or occurrences in which conceptual capacities are drawn into operations.”\(^4^3\) For McDowell, at the time of experience, the subject already has the conceptual capacities that enables him to recognize the similarities and difference between his different perceptions\(^4^4\). For McDowell, perceptions are conceptual and the latter are drawn on involuntarily. Perceptions then justify beliefs non-inferentially. Concepts can be mere perceptual concepts e.g., pawn or practical concepts such as moving the king or moving.\(^4^5\) Unlike perceptual concepts, “practical concepts represent possible features of the world that are directly linked to an agent’s actions.”\(^4^6\) Practical concepts realized in acting are concepts of things to do e.g., move the queen in retreat, and realizing such a concept is doing the thing in question, not thinking about doing it. Moreover, practical
concepts are linked to other concepts in a systematic manner. For example, the concept “of capturing the king is connected to wining, king, playing, and the object of the game.”

To put it briefly, McDowell objects to Dreyfus, and claims that for mature people embodied coping is permeated with mindedness because perceptions and experiences are saturated with concepts. As an agent gains skills, his skillfulness is for him to act, when his experienced practical concepts draw him into action. McDowell contends that mindedness is operative in our flow actions, and this is not incongruent with our immersed bodily life. He argues that our perception, thoughts, and action can only be smooth because our perceptual relation to the world is conceptual all the way down and out. From McDowell’s standpoint the phenomenology of embodied coping supports his recasting of rationality as thoroughly embodied, and suggests that it is Dreyfus who is clinging to a detached conception of rationality. McDowell objects to Dreyfus’s suggestion that mindedness is detached from our immersed bodily life, because that would be committing to a kind of dualism vulnerable to the Myth of the Disembodied Intellect. McDowell also objects to Dreyfus’s claim that man, on the one hand, is free and open to bind himself to the affordances and solicitations when he is in the state of flow, while on the other hand, he is free to step back from his activities in the flow and reflect on reasons and concepts. He does not agree with cognitivists who claim that when we become experts, our rules become unconscious. In McDowell’s view, concepts and our capacity for conceptualization are operative whether or not we are explicitly aware of them.
For McDowell, affordances and solicitations are the same, and once they are made explicit, they both belong to the space of reason. The space of reason has a logical continuity that encompasses ostensible sensory experiences such as ostensible seeing, solicitation, intuition, and judgment. In the space of reason, experience involves both practical and perceptual concepts in a continuum. As such, along the experiential path of learning how to ride a bike, for example, the training wheels don’t (all of a sudden) become invisible because otherwise the continuity between our learning and riding experiences would be violated.

Both McDowell and Dreyfus agree that “thanks to socialization, experts conform to reasons that can be retroactively reconstructed.” However, McDowell claims that “reasons are not behind actions but are in actions such as in unreflective ones including the case of phronesis,” and unreflective actions are neither detached nor discursive. For the case of phronesis, McDowell states that, “unreflective action is a case of properly formed practical intellect at work.”

As stated earlier, the consequential part of the Dreyfus-McDowell debate hinges on how unreflective bodily coping or actions are conceptual, and how actions are permeated with rationality and mindedness. McDowell holds that, while in the phenomenology of unreflective actions, there may be an appearance of no reasoning, but there is responsiveness to reasons and rationality. This is because, in the process of our upbringing (Bildung), we are initiated into tradition and language and inculcated into
culture when we acquire our second nature and habits of a distinctively rational form. 

McDowell holds that "the ability of adult humans to step back, means that the same conceptual capacities must be shaping our experiences, whether the subject is unreflectively immersed in action or not." McDowell posits that the capacities that are operative in ordinary perceptual engagement with the world, and "in ordinary bodily action, belong to a subject’s rationality in that strong sense: they are conceptual in the sense in which I claim that our perceptual and active lives are conceptually shaped." 

Note also that an agent’s concepts get drawn in (pre-reflectively and pre-judgmentally in) his experience, which applies not only to phenomenal concepts but also to practical concepts. The latter includes moral concepts. For example, without deliberation, and not out of some instinctive or biological imperative, a virtuous person acts kindly with spontaneity when the situation draws the kind behavior. The virtuous agent knows and acts with reliable sensibility in every situation that demands it. In McDowell’s view, actions are not just initiated by simple practical concerns but also moral ones. In the case of virtuous actions, there is answerability to the world in view e.g., when I see it, my actions are immediately justified. As such, moral concepts are available to a virtuous agent’s judgment as well as to his experience. The idea here is that at the agent’s sensory experience level, there are moral concepts instantiated. Virtue consist in being able to heed the moral requirements and heed them without any resistance. So, a moral training involves silencing the agent’s other motivations.
In summary, McDowell rejects the idea of existence of non-conceptual experiences. He claims that our conceptual contents and capacities are already operational in our experiencing the world, and because there is spontaneity in conceptual capacities, our experience is open to the world. Based on McDowell's perspective, it is consequently "the spontaneity of the understanding, and the power of conceptual thinking that brings both the world and the self into view." For McDowell, concepts are in actions not behind them, and "creatures without conceptual capacities consequently lack both self-consciousness and the experience of objective reality." It is of note that McDowell’s reading of Knoblauch example, and its emphasis on the capacity to reflect notwithstanding, suggests that he may be open to the idea that being able to act skillfully requires temporarily quieting down the ability to reflect (on one’s concepts).

C. Gottlieb’s View:Speedy Actions are a Form of Non-Reflective Intelligence

In his 2011 paper titled, “Unreflective Action and The Argument from Speed,” Gottlieb focuses on whether embodied coping in speedy action is conceptually shaped. Gottlieb views Dreyfus’s arguments to be founded on two perspectives: “first, argument from speed, wherein for certain expertly skilled actions, there is no time for reflection.
Second, the agent is *phenomenologically* unaware of reflection on his actions. He neither plans his action nor is aware of himself as a subject, self, or I."^72

Objecting to Dreyfus’s view, Gottlieb thinks that one's reflection drop out in speedy actions, such as in blitz chess or baseball.~73~ Moreover, Gottlieb disagrees with Dreyfus for failing to defend linking why an action must involve reflection if it involves concepts.~74~ Gottlieb’s strategy is to “undermine Dreyfus’s general assumption by arguing that perceptual concepts, e.g., my chess pieces are white, can contribute to perceptual experiences independent of reflection” via our *practical concepts*, such as moving the king in a game of chess.~75~ Gottlieb agrees with McDowell that at least when it comes to perceptual concepts, the conceptual inferential activity required for experience becomes (through habit and learning) a form of non-reflective intelligence that operates at an unconscious level.~76~ Relying on Sellars, Gottlieb suggests that perceptual experiences can be conceptual and non-reflective at the same time, having the structure of judgments, but without the conscious activity of comparison and analysis.~77~

The existence and distinction between practical concepts and perceptual concepts cannot be taken for granted, and needs to be substantiated. Thus, one could advocate for Dreyfus’s view, by shifting the burden of proof back onto Gottlieb and argue that practical concepts are vulnerable to similar kinds of challenges to that of perceptual concepts. Although Dreyfus agrees that practical wisdom enables an agent to do things intelligently,
he nevertheless notes that when things that are done with practical wisdom, they are done without explicit thought or concepts (as in the case of Aristotle’s phronesis, which at its core is about ethical expertise). Banking on Dreyfus’s acquiescence to practical wisdom, Gottlieb could argue that practical concepts and unreflective intelligence are operative in our unreflective actions, similar to the case of phronesis.

Gottlieb posits that “in perceptual experience, concepts operate on experience, and even if such concepts fail to be phenomenologically salient, we are not justified in inferring the non-existence of such concepts.” According to Gottlieb, to license the non-existence of concepts based on an agent’s phenomenological report that he is unaware of reflections in flow actions, Dreyfus commits the phenomenological fallacy (i.e., inferring the non-existence of something by its non-appearance). Dreyfus, however, places the onus on conceptualist to show that concepts in fact exists and are necessary in action, and although unproductive, Gottlieb shifts the opposite burden of proof back on Dreyfus.

In summary, Gottlieb holds that “actions are conceptually structured and that reflective conceptual actions do not necessarily require explicit reflection during the experience.” Gottlieb concedes that Dreyfus might be right that at certain stages in the development of an agent’s skills, reflection on different practical concepts might be needed, and that it is possible in some cases for reflection to eventually drop out, when an agent does not experience awareness about reasons behind his actions in flow. However,
Gottlieb asserts that when our reflections drop out, our practical concepts do not necessarily drop out.\(^{82}\)

**III. SUPPLEMENTING GOTTLEIB'S VIEW: OBJECTION TO DREYFUS'S CLAIM THAT UNREFLECTIVE ACTIONS ARE NON-CONCEPTUAL**

So far, I have outlined Dreyfus's position that an agent's conceptual capacities are available and operative in most actions but not operant in flow actions. McDowell's position is that one's perceptions and actions are conceptual all the way down, including in flow. Dreyfus disagrees with McDowell and relying, in part, on agent reports that he neither experiences awareness about concepts nor remembers reasons behind his actions when he is in the zone, and hence he concludes that flow actions are non-conceptual. Moreover, because reflections on concepts interfere with an agent's successful flow actions, from Dreyfus's vantage point, he posits that concepts are neither used nor pervasive in flow action when the agent has become an expert.\(^{83}\) Gottlieb agrees with McDowell's position and argues that unreflective actions can be guided by an expert's practical concepts (i.e., unreflective intelligence).

Dreyfus's view appears attractive for its corroboration with an expert agent's own reports that he recalls no reflection and no awareness of concepts in flow actions, and novice agent's conformation of both awareness and reflection on concepts in their actions.
McDowell camp’s view may appear unconvincing as an *argumentum ad populum* for purporting that agents do not know what they are experiencing in flow actions, but McDowell’s camp does, despite the expert’s self-reports of not experiencing concepts in flow actions.

It is noteworthy to highlight again how Dreyfus and McDowell have different understandings of what concepts are in action, and that they may be talking past each other in this debate. To be clear, I am marshaling phenomenological and common sensical considerations in favor of Gottlieb and McDowell who view concepts as being in actions (and not behind them), including when an agent is in a state of flow. To differentiate Dreyfus’s view, he holds that an action must involve reflection if it involves concepts. According to Dreyfus, because there are no reflections in flow actions, then concepts do not operate in flow actions. In objecting to Dreyfus, my strategy here is not to challenge his view on reflections involving concept but instead to assume his account of reflections involving concepts as being true, and then show how his claim of nonconceptual flow actions (from his own vantage point) does not cut mustard on similar grounds of common sense and phenomenology.

In the next segment of this essay, I supplement Gottlieb’s defense of conceptuality of unreflective actions to strengthen McDowell’s and challenge Dreyfus’s views, using three general strategies: (1) Expanding on the phenomenology of an agent’s actions; (2)
Looking at concepts through Dreyfus’s lenses, I would argue that the existence of concepts and reflections, in-and-out of flow actions, is not binary. Instead of an all-or-nothing characterization, concepts and reflections can operate on an agent in shades of gray. For example, a range of degrees from deep-rooted to weak or few to many concepts, and intense to faint reflections may be operating on an agent’s actions while he navigates in-and-out of a state of flow; and (3) by including some examples such as an expert’s self-prognosis of the before-during-after flow actions and other examples that supports presence of concepts in flow actions. To achieve this objective, I would argue:

First, concepts grow, take root, and persist throughout an agent’s development stages, from novelty to expertise. It seems against common sense to accept that such rooted concepts would disappear at the moment the expert puts them to work in flow actions. Moreover, it is hard to endorse the idea that an expert is better off if concepts were to vanish during his flow actions.

Second, minimal (and faintly noticeable) reflections on an expert agent’s deep-rooted concepts could be sufficient for performing expertly in a state of flow, considering an expert’s deep-rooted concepts and his sharpened concentration skills relative to the task at hand. Professional athletes in flow actions, for instance, faintly reflect on concepts when a ball is in their court. However faintly and quickly though, they strategize (use concepts) and make minor adjustments when the ball is in their opponent’s court.
Third, examples are provided to further support operations of concepts in the state of flow, such as: (a) Expert agent and peer experts often provide testimony about the use of concepts in strategizing before and reviewing application of concepts after flow actions such as in a game. This supports the existence and prevalence of concepts, despite agents reporting unawareness of reflections during flow action; (b) More conceptual-friendly explanations may be available with respect to Dreyfus’ examples such as in Knoblauch’s case. It is plausible that lack of emotional self-confidence caused Knoblauch to lose his concentration and flow, not the interference of his concepts or reflections.

Next, I provide my arguments to augment Gottlieb’s defense of the conceptuality of unreflective actions.

A. Concepts Grow from Novelty and Persist in Expertise

Dreyfus outlined five stages in the development of an agent’s skill: novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, and expertise.84 Novices learn and reflect on concepts over time to enhance their skills until they become experts. Dreyfus posits that after one has gone through the learning phase while being guided by concepts, he then transcends out of novelty and into the expertise phase when his concepts no longer operate on his actions. As noted earlier, even if we accept Dreyfus’s account of reflection on concepts, it is against common sense to concede that an expert’s rooted concepts grow and
remain operative until competency, then suddenly vanish just when it is time for him to put those concepts to expert level use. It is also against common sense to attribute to an agent the kind of conceptual and reflective operating structures that exhibit abrupt transitions from on-to-off at the exit and entrance of flow actions. Moreover, it seems arbitrary to accept Dreyfus’s proposition that an expert is better off if his deep-rooted concepts become inoperative during his expert level action.

As noted earlier, Dreyfus states that when we are acting in a state of flow and our mind detects that *something has gone wrong*, our self-consciousness reemerges. Upon the disruption of our bodily absorption in flow, we can then step back and reflect on our concepts. At the moment something goes wrong while an agent is acting in flow, I would argue that there is a phenomenological subtlety about the speed, force, and involuntary resurgence of concepts, which is worth pausing to ponder upon. At the moment an agent’s actions are disrupted, his conceptual actions re-dominate with immediacy and intensity. If concepts and reflections were so inoperative in flow actions, how could concepts take charge of our actions with such involuntary force and speed? Where are Dreyfus’s reflections when, in no time, concepts involuntarily take charge of the agent’s actions the moment his flow is disrupted? Concepts dominance on our actions with such immediacy and involuntary intensity at the threshold of flow is a challenge to Dreyfus’s account of reflections on concepts. As importantly, it reinforces McDowell’s view that expert’s concepts being so deep-rooted in action is a reason why expert agents report an inability to
explicitly notice or report on concepts in flow.

Actions of skilled people in flow is in fact complicated and not regular. For example, in flow, a chess player quickly changes strategy (but according to the rules) when his opponent moves the pawn instead of the bishop, a driver skillfully uses the shoulder lane (as permitted) to avoid hitting the car stopped in front, and a basketball player tips the ball in rebound on a missed shot (within the rules of the game). As such experts, navigate and respond to complication and surprises, reliably and consistently every time (not at the threshold of flow but) in flow itself, that is demonstrative of operations if concepts flow action.

According to Dreyfus, concepts are like the railing that the child uses to learn to walk. Once the child has learned how to walk, she does not need the railing (i.e., unreflective act of walking is non-conceptual for the child who has learned how to walk, as Dreyfus sees it). But, when for example her untied shoelaces cause her to lose balance, and immediately before she is about to trip over, she spontaneously and intensely looks for and reaches out for any rail-like support near-by (e.g., closest person, chair, or even using her own hands as support before she hits the ground) indicating that at least some of her walking concepts persist and remain operative in action. While in the zone and charging forward, as soon as an expert basketball player slips, he immediately uses his other hand as a support to bounce back on his feet and hustles not to lose possession of the ball.
Observing how concepts in professional sports re-emergence, (with such involuntary speed and force) at the exit and entrance boundaries of the zone, is more proof that concepts are in action including in flow actions, which again supports McDowell’s view.

**B. Minimal Reflections Are Sufficient for An Agent with Rooted Concepts and Sharpened Concentration**

In this segment, my argument strategy is to accept Dreyfus’s account of reflections on concepts as true, and offer a plausible alternative conclusion contrary to that of Dreyfus, which discloses how concept can remain operative on agent’s flow action.

I suggest that even from Dreyfus’s own vantage point, instead of an all-or-nothing and on-or-off operating structure purported by Dreyfus, concepts and reflections can operate on an agent in shades of gray. It is feasible for concepts to operate on agents on a sliding scale, so to speak, ranging from deep-rooted to weak or from few to many concepts. Moreover, there can be maximal to minimal (unnoticeably faint) reflections operating on agent in-and-out of flow actions. With the grading scale in mind, the deep-rootedness of an agent’s *concepts* and sharpness of his *concentration* are inversely proportional to the intensity of his *reflections* (which enables him to remember, take notice, and remain explicitly aware of concepts behind his actions). Because a novice agent’s concepts are shallow-rooted, he needs to practice and reflect more intensely and slowly on concepts to
improve his performance, which is so far consistent with Dreyfus’s claim. Learning requires the ability to reflect to different degrees, e.g., from maximal (slowly and intensely) to minimal (quickly and faintly) reflections when concepts take root. Incrementally an agent would need less reflections on his actions, as he progresses along his learning curve. As the agent’s performance converges to expert level, his concepts have taken roots, when he can handle tasks with less (i.e., quick and faint) reflection, as compared to when he was a novice with shallow-rooted concepts. As such, it is plausible for concepts to remain operative on agent’s flow actions because (although explicitly unnoticeable at times) quick and faint reflections on deep-rooted concepts can be enough for the agent to get by just fine.

In summary, even looking through reflections on concepts through Dreyfus’s lenses, there is a plausible alternative conclusion where concepts remain operant in flow actions, which is contrary to Dreyfus’s view. While an expert agent is acting, his reflection on concepts are directly proportional to his remembering such concepts, which are also directly proportional to his experiencing awareness about such concepts. As an agent in action progresses through maximally reflective and novice-like performance (with shallow-rooted concepts) to minimally reflective and expert-like performance, his deep-rooted concepts operate on his actions, although he might faintly remember his concepts in flow action.
Another aspect of an expert’s functioning in the zone is concentration. Concentration is a skill about focusing on what matters and defocusing on what is wasteful or unnecessary. For a given performance, generally, sharpness of an agent’s concentration is inversely proportional to the intensity of his reflection on concepts. When an agent concentrates, he zooms his focus on what matters in the present time and prioritizes on facets that bring about successful action. Concentration has two dimensions: the first is about concentrating on what is a priority or pertinent to performing the task at hand in the here and now; the second is about blocking out what is wasteful that is neither a priority nor pertinent to accommodate successful action, in the here and now. Once the expert completes an action step to the next, (no matter how fast the consecutive step intervals) the previous step loses its importance, and he learns not to waste his thoughts about it.

When an expert (in action) concentrates, the past fades for him because the past cannot be undone. As such, he learns to block the past real time since the past has little-to-no priority, e.g., a misstep, a wrong move a second ago, an old lost match, or a missed opportunity. Concentration on task at hand mandates forgetting the past, which can include not reflecting and not remembering reasons about past actions. Also, when the agent is acting, he concentrates on immediate steps that are drawn from his deep-rooted concepts, as opposed to wasteful worrying, or slowly reflecting on his next steps e.g., what if I lose? Should I reflect on my last step before I take my next step? Should I reflect and strategize my next step while I am taking this step? The agent stays in the present moment, noticing,
and *tuning-in* his attention and his finite mental resources on the priorities of the tasks at hand. To be immersed in a flow activity generally requires *filtering-out* what might get in the way of performing. And, in concentration, the mind’s focus is on only that which counts toward the next successful step. Skillful concentration quiets the mind by *tuning-out* wasteful and non-essential past and future reflections to a level so faint that deep-rooted concepts, while operant, may not be noticeable or remembered by the agent. The test for and the idea of presence or absence of reflection on concepts solely predicated on agent’s ability to notice/recall them cannot be taken for granted. Not explicitly recalling every reason behind one's actions could be a consequence of an agent’s sharpened concentration in order for him to prioritize and focus on what optimizes success, instead of wasting his attention on remembering reason behind his step-by-step past and future action steps, especially in high-speed activities.

Dreyfus holds that only after concepts are relinquished, can our expertise return to action. However, as noted earlier, an agent’s reflections and concentration can modulate from minimum to maximum depending on rootedness of his concepts required for a given performance. It is feasible for an expert in flow to faintly and unnoticeably reflect on his deep-rooted concepts, while sharply concentrating. Therefore, and contrary to Dreyfus’s conclusions, an agent’s faint and unnoticeable reflections may simply be sufficient when things are going well, not because concepts are disruptive, inoperative, or have no use in actions in flow.
Consider the example of riding a bicycle. A novice rider first learns by reflecting on the concept of how to stay in balance while riding. As such, at first, he remembers the balancing concepts, e.g., equalizing the weight on the sides of the two wheels, pedals, and handlebar, and pays attention to the concepts that enable him to stay in balance. Once he has mastered the concept of balancing, he moves on to learning the concept of turning, and how to use the brakes to slow down. When he is turning, his reflection on his rooted balancing concepts are fainted enough to be unnoticeable while riding. At this stage, his balancing concepts are in action because they are rooted enough form him, when slow and intense reflections serve no purpose. Concentration enables him to quiet-down his reflections about balancing, and amplify his reflection on turning and breaking concepts. If and when he hits a bump in the road and momentarily loses his balance, his balancing concepts re-emerge with involuntary dominance and speed, enabling him to bounce himself back to balance, which again supports McDowell’s view that concepts are in action.

In summary, sharpness of an agent’s concentration and deep-rootedness of his concepts are inversely proportional to the intensity of his reflection on concepts. As such, maximized concepts operating on expert actions with minimized reflections when he is maximally concentrating on what matters could explain how experts may not notice or recall detailed reasons about their ‘in the zone’ actions.
C. CONCEPTS ARE OPERATIVE BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER FLOW ACTION SUCH AS IN A GAME

An expert's testimony about his transitions from 'entering flow' to 'exiting flow' in conjunction with his 'during flow' perspective may shed some light on the operation of concepts in one's actions in flow. For example, athletes, observers, coaches, and Sport TV specialists in professional sports strategize about games beforehand, e.g., studying an opponent's past techniques, weaknesses, and strengths compared to their own team, competitive line ups, or a coach's game plan. After the game, they generally review various conceptual aspects of their game, e.g., player and team strategic objectives versus actual results, shortcomings, reasons for flawed execution, and an opponent's winning, losing, or new strategies. Often, when an athlete watches his own game on a video re-play and responds to reporters about strategies that worked or ones that did not work, he offers conceptual explanations. Contrary to Dreyfus's claim, a preponderance of conceptual testimony offered by expert observers and athletes about before, during, and after flow actions, makes it more plausible that concepts remain operative in flow actions. 89
D. **Emotional Challenges Can Get in the Way of Unreflective Actions in the Flow**

There are other conceptual-friendly explanations for some of the examples that Dreyfus has offered. Dreyfus suggests that Knoblauch’s thinking too much about his game caused him to lose the ability to throw the ball effortlessly. I suggest that it is more credible that Knoblauch’s emotional challenges, such as loss of confidence, ruined his game. As noted, concentration is key to persist in the state of flow while an objective task is accomplished. Emotional challenges can interfere with an agent’s ability to concentrate. In the case of Knoblauch, only after identifying his emotional challenges, he started thinking about his missteps and reasoning to figure out why he was failing. It is likely that his emotional imbalance and nervousness (not over-analysis and the interference of his reasoning and rationalization) caused Knoblauch to lose his concentration, and therefore his game flow.

Dreyfus also suggests that an expert’s conceptualization cannot be behind the throwing, and if it is, then it can only interfere with the absorbed coping. Looking at reflections from Dreyfus’s vantage point, earlier I offered a different conclusion than that of Dreyfus, that an expert’s minimal reflection on his deep-rooted concepts could remain operant on him, keeping concepts in action, and not necessarily interfere with the agent’s absorbed coping. For example, professional athletes may faintly reflect on and thus not
notice concepts when a ball is in their side of the court, however many athletes testify that they use the time to reflect more noticeably and make minor adjustments when the ball is in their opponent’s side of the court. Another example could be a tennis player who monitors his opponent’s bodily posture and the direction of his racket to anticipate the trajectory of his opponent’s next move.

IV. Conclusion

In summary, the goal of this essay is to supplement Gottlieb’s objections to Dreyfus’ claim that concepts are not operative during flow actions. To achieve this goal, I first argued that it is against common sense to accept that an expert’s rooted concepts and rules become inoperative the moment he puts them to work when he is in the zone. Expert agents, in flow actions, navigates through complicated circumstances and respond to surprises reliably, which disclosed the rootedness of concepts in flow action. Moreover, for example when in flow, a chess player follows the rules by moving the bishop across, a driver follows rules by stopping at the red light, and a basketball player follows rules by blocking his opponent using his hands. Also, in flow, a chess player does not break the rule by moving the pawn straight, a driver does not break the rules by either stopping at the green-light or putting his foot on the gas pedal when a car stops in the front, and a basketball player does not break the rule by kicking the ball. Doesn’t observing an agent following
rules in action speak as loud, if not louder than, his testimony that he does not recall following rules in flow action? And, doesn’t observing an agent not breaking rules in flow action, leads one to believe that concepts are operant in flow actions despite his testimony that he does not experience concepts and is not aware of rules operating on him? It is plausible, according to common sense to conclude, that concepts operate in action because observing every typical agent, he consistently and reliably follows rules and he does not break rules when acting in flow. Also, for example, it may seem that we open a door without thinking. But we may think about how many steps we need to take towards the door depending on how far we are from the door. We also may think about how we might choose or use our left or right hands, and which keys to use depending on whether the doorknob is keyed, levered, or circular. An expert tennis player may not think deeply about his move when the ball is in his court, but he does think and anticipate a possible trajectory of the ball when the ball is in his opponent’s court, and plans his move depending on his opponent’s arm and body posture, and the opponent’s racket movement. A blitz chess player may not think when it is his turn to make his move, possibly because he had time (albeit short) to think a tiny bit ahead and adjust his strategy while his opponent was making his move. Therefore, even looking at reflections on concepts through Dreyfus’s lenses and using his own examples, the operating structure of concepts and reflection during flow action do not necessarily follow an abrupt all-or-nothing and on-or-off dynamics which Dreyfus purports. On Dreyfus’s own account, but contrary to his conclusions, there is
evidence that some thinking on some kinds of concepts and some reflection be operating in flow actions, even though minimally and unnoticeable. Moreover, if concepts were inoperative in flow, how could concepts re-emerges involuntarily with such dominance and so quickly when something goes wrong and an agent’s flow is disrupted? Such immediate, forceful re-emerge of concepts in action when flow is interrupted, supports the persistence of the agent’s concepts in his flow actions. As such, McDowell’s account of concepts being in action fits the bill. I argued that the strengths of an agent’s (rooted) concepts and (sharp) concentration skills are inversely proportional to the intensity of his reflections. Even on Dreyfus’s account of reflections on concepts, an expert’s minimized reflections may be a more plausible reason for how experts, with deep-rooted concepts and sharpened concentration, may be faintly noticing or being unable to report every reason behind their actions in flow. Therefore, it is plausible to draw a conclusion that concepts remain operant on an agent in flow, which is contrary to Dreyfus’s conclusion. I also pointed out that an expert or observer testimony about the use of concepts to strategize and review actions before, during, and after a game, supports that the seemingly unreflective actions are conceptual.
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REFERENCES


END NOTES

1 Gottlieb, 2011, p. 342. The terms agent, expert, expert agent, and mature agent are used interchangeably, as are the terms being in the flow and being in the zone. Also, the term action and performance are used interchangeably, as are the terms strength, maximized, deep-rooted, or intensity. Reasons, rules, and concepts are used interchangeably, as well as the terms attentive and reflective.

2 Gottlieb, 2011, p. 340. Reasons closely resembles concepts, but for McDowell reason is permeated with rationality and reasons are conceptually informed.

3 Generally, the object of Gottlieb’s essay is sensory-motor actions. Unlike Hume, who posited that actions are motivated by belief (with role of the passive representations) or desire (playing the motivational role), McDowell and Gottlieb hold that perception of circumstances justifies both the agent’s desire and his action, and that response to such circumstances triggers a compelling desire for him to act. Gottlieb seems to endorse Hume’s view as true from an explanatory perspective, but not as a justificatory one.

4 Kant, I. A107.
5 McDowell, 1996, p. 5.
6 Kant, I. A51/B75
McDowell, 1996, p. 24-26: McDowell is not an idealist to be representing the world as a shadow of our thinking, and although he views reality as independent of our thinking, he does not picture the world outside an outer boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere. “That things are thus and so is the conceptual content of an experience, but if the subject of the experience is not misled, that very same thing, that things are thus and so, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world.” McDowell, argue that “we could not recognize capacities operative in experience as conceptual at all were it not for the way they are integrated into a rationally organized network of capacities for active adjustment of one's thinking to the deliverances of experience.”

Dreyfus, 2005, p. 54.; Gottlieb, 2011, p. 346. For Dreyfus “conceptual activity not only requires judgment but also a form reflective judgment.

Dreyfus, 1986, p. 50. Dreyfus suggests that reflections are cognitive processes involved in the retrieval of relevant and pertinent concepts and information, ‘analysis and comparisons of alternatives’, and he also classifies explanations as a form of reflection. I would argue that for an expert who is performing in flow, his reflection would likely contain more retrieval and less process (analysis and comparison) since an expert has (through learning, practice, and maturity of his skills) already pre-processed and can anticipate various permutations of possible encounters and likely patterns e.g. chess moves, curve balls.

Gottlieb, 2011, p. 346. If perceptual experiences and judgment were conceptual and non-reflective, then “thought, action, and experiences are conceptual having the structure of judgement, but without the conscious activity of comparison and analysis”, which is against common sense.


Dreyfus, 2007c, p. 110.

McDowell (1994), pp.56-7 : McDowell claims that it is the pairing of the capacity for demonstrative thought with our battery of concepts for the features presented in experience which discloses to us the conceptual resources required to absorb the depth of experience.


Dreyfus, 2007b, p. 373.

Dreyfus, 2007a, p. 361. Dreyfus asserts “that we don’t normally reflect while we act”, and that unreflective actions cover a wide range of actions such as an expert’s actions while climbing a mountain or common actions such as hiking or turning a doorknob.

Dreyfus, 2007c, p. 104.; Dreyfus, 2000, p. 288. Note that Heidegger and Merleau-Ponti hold that we have sub-rational competences. When we interact with the world there is ‘no we’ and ‘no world’, but just smoothly flowing activity.


Sartre, 2003, p. 263.; Zahavi, 2010, p. 59.; Rietveld, 2010, p. 185. Rietveld objects to “Dreyfus claim that there is no place for experiential content in absorbed coping and speaks of the possibility of mind-free practical activity. But, how can one meaningfully speak of a phenomenology of mindless coping - as Dreyfus repeatedly does - if the coping is completely unconscious?”

Dreyfus, 2007b, p. 373.

Dreyfus, 2005, p. 50.


Dreyfus, 2007c, p. 65.

For Dreyfus, reflecting on solicitations converts them to affordances which are rational. For example, when a baseball player reflects on the mechanics of throwing a ball, then he is stepping back from solicitations and looking at affordances.

Dreyfus, 2007b, p. 356-357.

Rouse, 2007, p. 3.


Gottlieb, 2011, p. 344-345.

Gottlieb, 2011, p. 345.

Dreyfus, 2007c, p. 104.

Dreyfus likens *absorbed coping* to an airport radio whose beacon doesn’t give a warning signal unless the plane strays off course. “When the pilot is on the beam there is no experience at all...A *coper* must have the capacity to enter a monitoring stance if the brain sends an alarm signal that something is going wrong...Sensitivity to deviation guides one’s coping.”


McDowell, 1996, p. 46.

McDowell, 1996, p. 49


Gottlieb, 2011, p. 345. “Perceiving a pawn as a pawn exhibits an understanding, at least, of some aspects of the game of chess. Realizing the practical concept ‘capture the king’ also exhibits an *understanding* of the game, one that, in some cases, involve a more complete understanding of the game than does perceiving a pawn as pawn. The issue of debate between Dreyfus and McDowell is whether these modes of understanding involve in actions should be considered conceptual when the actions are unreflective and absorbed.”

Gottlieb, 2011, p. 345. Also, as noted earlier, in Dreyfus view “neither perceptual concepts nor practical concepts contribute to actions” of experts in a state of flow.


Gottlieb, 2011, p. 345.


With respect to actions, the scope of Gottlieb’s essay mainly addresses sensory-motor actions. Unlike Hume, who posited that actions are motivated by belief (with role of the passive representations) or desire (playing the motivational role), McDowell and Gottlieb hold that perception of circumstances justifies both desire and action, and receptivity in circumstances triggers a compelling desire for one to act. Motivations are not psychological, but perceptual, and they pave the way for our responsiveness. The space of motivations is constituted by the normative structures that govern affordances and responses thereto, and can be expressively evaluated from the space of reasons. In this space appropriateness is determined by how good of a *grip* our perception allows us to have on a situation. It has *satisfaction or improvement conditions*, but not *success*. In other words, we can evaluate our perception; by how appropriate our responses are to the affordances with which we are confronted. The space of motivations is inter-subjective and so the perceptions of others constitute the tribunal that judges the appropriateness of our coping. If I am standing way to close to someone they will respond with distain or apprehension, and I will respond by correcting my action.

McDowell, 2009b, p. 324.; Dreyfus, 2007a, p. 353. For Dreyfus embodied coping is a type of embodied intelligence rather than mental intelligence - since it’s not mental intelligence, then its mindless.

McDowell, 2007a, p. 349.; McDowell, 2007b, p. 369

Also note that there is disagreement between McDowell and Sellars about the role of reflection on judgments, but according to Sellars (1997) "the conceptual, inferential activity required for experience becomes, through habit and learning, is non-reflective so that it operates at a level under the radar of relative consciousness."

Rouse, 2013, p. 268.; McDowell, 1994, p. 89. For McDowell “intentions without overt activity are idle, and movements of limbs without concepts are mere happenings, not expression of agency”

For Dreyfus, affordances are different from solicitations is that “although when we step back and contemplate then, affordances can be experienced as features of the world, when we respond to their solicitations they are not figuring for a subject as features of the world (in McDowell’s sense)”. According to Dreyfus, for McDowell, solicitations and affordances are the same since he sees the world as already a set of facts that are determinate and that can then be named and thought and fit into concepts.

McDowell, 2007a, p. 344.; McDowell, 2009, p. 316. “The openness to affordances, that is an element in what it is for us to have embodied coping skills, becomes part of our openness to the world.” Our perceptual openness to affordances, which is necessarily bound up with embodied coping, is permeated with rationality.” For example, when we focus on an affordance, we can no longer see it as an affordance. We now see it in the space of reasons, as the object of belief and judgment, and thus it can never again be a mere affordance.

Rietveld notes that responsiveness-to-reason does not mean that reason (general or situation specific) somehow influences the actions of an expert. Unlike responsiveness-to-normative-significance, responsiveness-to-reason is not experienced by us in unreflective action.

McDowell argues that the dualism of norms and nature is avoided, because Bildung gives us the capacity to step-back (even when we are immersed into the flow or are in the zone), which is how strong rationality gets permeates into our action, including unreflective action. McDowell also asserts that “our responsive to reason is in general a function of Bildung in light of our culture, upbringing, and education that are compatible with our natural capacities. Smith, in support of McDowell, asserts that our responsiveness appeals to the unbounded space of reason, second nature, Bildung, and it is a preconceptual, holistic, socially shared background in which man is engaged with the world.

McDowell, 1998, p. 50. “Virtue is a disposition, perhaps of an especially rational and self-conscious kind, to behave kindly”


Zahavi, 2012, p. 3.


Zahavi, 2012, p. 3.

McDowell, 2007a, p. 342.


Dreyfus, 1986, pp. 27-28.; Gottlieb, 2011, p. 340.; Gottlieb, 2011, p. 345.: Both Dreyfus and McDowell imply that know-how is like intuition (also referred to as embodied coping) and that actions involving know-how are like absorbed coping. “Dreyfus and McDowell accept that many actions are forms of embodied coping, but they differ whether the embodied coping is conceptually shaped and, thereby, rational. Dreyfus claims that speedy actions are not conceptually informed and hence non-conceptual actions. Dreyfus claims
the two highest levels of skill are characterized by a rapid, fluid, and involved kind of behavior that bears no apparent similarity to the slow detached reasoning of the problem-solving process.” Dreyfus must then show without equivocation that bodily actions can outstrip reflection. Gottlieb highlights that Dreyfus “connects thinking about acting with the passage of time needed for reflection on concepts to contribute to action. Dreyfus had implied that concepts had no place in our flow actions. Gottlieb also states that “some capacities diminish success, is to recognize that a practical concept is a structural component of the action.” To accept that something can go wrong (not according to one’s intention conception) is to recognize a practical concept involved in the action. Gottlieb highlights Dreyfus’s point that “unreflective actions exhibit agency, and yet do not require reflection or attention. Gottlieb reframes Dreyfus position: “Reflection is required for concepts to be operative in action. Because reflection is absent in fast action, action must be non-conceptual.”

74 Gottlieb, 2011, p. 340. According to Gottlieb, Dreyfus follows Gilbert Ryle view that know-how is irreducible to know-that, where know-how is not a form of propositional knowledge and that if a person knows how to perform an act, then that person has an ability. As such, know-hows are not responsive to reason, permeated with rationality and conceptuality informed"

75 Dreyfus, 1986, p. 6. Gottlieb, 2011, p. 345. According to Dreyfus, Grandmasters typically perform actions mindlessly and without reflection, yet with expertise.” Dreyfus has specified five stages in the acquisition and development of skill: novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, and expertise. “It is not until one reaches the level of expertise that reflection fully drops out. According to Gottlieb, at the stage of expertise, discrimination or ‘recognition, there is an immediate intuitive response.” When one’s skills advance to a level of expertise, this stage of reflection drops out, which means the actual time required for carrying out one and the same action decreases.”

76 Gottlieb, 2011, p. 346. Gottlieb holds that “perceiving something as a book, for example, does not involve inferring a conclusion from comparison and analysis of other possible objects the thing might be. That here is not conscious inferential or reflective activity involved in the experience does not discount the fact that concepts are involved.” As such, Gottlieb holds that unreflective action does not make it intelligent action. “There is a type of embodied intelligent at work rather than mental intelligence. Because intelligence’ is not mental, and instead available in bodily movement, then intelligence is an embodied form of coping with what a specific situation requires”

77 Gottlieb, 2011, p. 346.; Gottlieb, 2011, p. 348. Gottlieb discusses “Sellars’s Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind, for instance, is an argument about how perceptual experience should be conceived as conceptual and non-reflective at the same time. Sellars’s view of judgment, in contrast to Dreyfus, does not exaggerate reflection’s role in judgment (an anti- intellectualist view of judgment).”


79 Gottlieb, 2011, p. 351.

80 Gottlieb, 2011, p. 353.

81 Marcel, 2003, pp. 60ff. Being unaware of the content of our unreflective actions can be attributed to (i) minimal awareness of sub-goals to reach our performance goals, (ii) goals and intentions scape awareness with the passing of time over an extended period of performance, and (iii) strategic goals are retained in memory and awareness which tactical goals are forgotten.


83 Dreyfus, 1986, p. 7. Dreyfus states that “Phenomenology suggests that, although many forms of expertise pass through a stage in which one needs reasons to guide action, after much involved experience, the learner develops a way of coping in which reasons play no role.”

84 Dreyfus, and Dreyfus, 1986, chapter 1; Dreyfus, 1990.


86 Beilock, 2001, p. 702. For Grossberg, plasticity to stability trade-off is about “where one must decide when to learn and when not to learn since learning involves overwriting previously learned patterns.”
Action on reaction is faster than acting on intention. While errors can be made in the game, the difference in intensity of the errors varies depending on a “clutch” performer who is one that can make minor adjustments during competition while a “choker” who is one that over adjusts causing errors that amount to coming last.

87 We have limited mental and emotional capital, and thus we have learned to be cognitively and emotionally efficient including through habit, custom, learning, and practice.

88 A neural network processing analogy can be made to describe the ‘number of times reflections occur’ versus the ‘intensity of each reflection’. The same amount of information (content in a memory bank) can be transferred by either reflecting several times in sequence with less intensity (serial reflections) or by reflecting fewer number of times but each reflection being done with higher intensity (parallel reflection). In neural networks that aim to model the human brain as well as conventional computers, serial access to memory (analogous to serial reflections) occurs slowly and access to data in the memory cells are easier. For faster operations, access to the same amount of content in the memory bank can be done in parallel (analogous to parallel reflection) while occurring at higher speeds, but it’s costlier. Analogously, serial reflections (access of same amount of memory content) occur slow and as such memory access to such content can be easier. Parallel reflections are less frequent but more impactful with higher intensity, which access the same amount of memory data but it’s done in speed.

89 Gottlieb, 2011, p. 356. Gottlieb suggests that even post hoc exercise of “retroactive rationalization” should strengthen and not weaken the claim that concepts were, more likely than not, operative in flow like actions. If asked why I made a certain move, I can give a reason, although I may have to think about it in order to make it explicit. The fact that I cannot describe every feature of a blade of grass I saw does not mean that I did not see something that fits under the concept “grass.” A correct description of coping experience is going to be misleading, precisely because it involves an attempt to describe an experience that, by definition, was not explicitly thematized at the time it occurred. Why, then, should we focus on the unthematized experience as authoritative, rather than the thematized re-appropriation of that experience?”

90 McDowell, 2007a, p. 344.; Gottlieb, 2011, p. 340-342.; McDowell implies that once Knoblauch tried to “bring the limb movements that contribute to [throwing the ball] within the scope of intention otherwise than under specifications, he ceased to allow his skill (i.e. his ‘ingrained bodily habits’) to fill in the necessary movements. Gottlieb states that “when mindedness gets detached from immersion in activity, it can be the enemy of embodied coping”, not that mindedness is absent from such immersion

91 It is a common idea that people use drugs to get in and out of a feeling, including athletes whose obsession with winning or fear of losing (disappointing) motivates their drug use. After quitting baseball, Knoblauch was charged with domestic violence, and use of illicit drugs from early 2000.

92 Emotions for McDowell are perceptive, especially of moral situations. He calls emotions our affective and attitudinative propensities, and they are conceptual. It can be argued, from McDowell’s point of view that, it is not that concepts got in the way of Knoblauch performance, but instead his misplaced (emotional) concepts collided with and blocked his right concepts from operating on him in the game flow.