

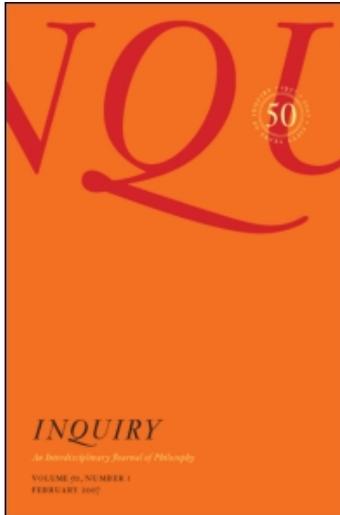
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# McDowell and Dreyfus on Unreflective Action

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**ABSTRACT** *Within philosophy there is not yet an integrative account of unreflective skillful action. As a starting point, contributions would be required from philosophers from both the analytic and continental traditions. Starting from the McDowell-Dreyfus debate, shared Aristotelian-Wittgensteinian common ground is identified. McDowell and Dreyfus agree about the importance of embodied skills, situation-specific discernment and responsiveness to relevant affordances. This sheds light on the embodied and situated nature of adequate unreflective action and provides a starting point for the development of an account that does justice to insights from both philosophical traditions.*

## I. Introduction

In many<sup>1</sup> episodes in our daily lives we act adequately, yet unreflectively. Currently within philosophy there is no integrative account of unreflective skillful action (henceforth “unreflective action”). To achieve this, contributions from both analytic philosophers and philosophers with roots in the continental tradition would be required. Such a new, integrative philosophical account of unreflective action has potentially emerged from the recent debate between John McDowell (2007a, 2007b) and Hubert Dreyfus (2005, 2007a, 2007b). However, this could well be overlooked because one’s attention may naturally be drawn to their discussions of disagreements about the roles of, for instance, conceptuality, mindedness and rationality. These issues are interesting but not the best basis for developing a better understanding of unreflective action (for which Dreyfus generally uses the term “skillful coping”).<sup>2</sup> The aim of this paper is to uncover the Aristotelian-Wittgensteinian common ground in their positions and to show that, notwithstanding the

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exceptions that I will discuss in the second half of this paper, they are in broad agreement about the relevant phenomena. Along the way we will see that a focus on their common ground sheds new light on the issues that have arisen in the debate and potentially dissolves some of the points of disagreement between the two philosophers.

McDowell (1996) rightly reminds us that what is natural is not exhausted by the realm of causal law. Our second nature, acquired from socio-cultural practices, is nature too, and the expression of second nature in unreflective bodily coping is not a brute causal event. From Dreyfus (2007a, 2007b) and Charles Taylor (2002), on the other hand, we can learn that the intentionality, normativity and rationality of *unreflective* action are interestingly different from those of thought and of reflective action and can best be understood on their own terms. That is to say that we should try to steer clear of the terminology of reflective (propositionally structured) intentionality and rationality (i.e., of rationality in the strong sense), which is McDowell's primary interest.<sup>3</sup>

In order to realize the aim of uncovering shared Aristotelian-Wittgensteinian common ground, I fully support McDowell in his efforts to dismantle the deep dualism of the normative and the natural by holding on to the idea of "a naturalism of second nature" (McDowell, 1996, p. 86), while, in contrast to McDowell, stressing that the resulting reconciliation of norms and nature in "partially enchanted" (p. 85) nature, needs to recognize the particularities of unreflective action, including its experiential specifics as emphasized by Dreyfus (2007a, 2007b). I will do this not by referring to what McDowell (1996, p. 5), following Wilfrid Sellars, calls the "space of reasons", but, in an attempt to do justice to the phenomenology of normativity in unreflective action, by emphasizing the importance of *responsiveness to normative significance*. Our responsiveness to relevant "affordances", which I have investigated in Rietveld (2008c), is an unreflective form of this. Affordances are possibilities for action offered by the environment (Gibson, 1979; Michaels, 2003; Chemero, 2003).

In Section II, I will argue that McDowell shares with phenomenologists and Wittgensteinians the will to do justice to the phenomena. Establishing as a preliminary point that McDowell cares about getting the phenomena right is important, because in the second half of this paper I will argue that a weakness of his account is that aspects of it do not entirely fit in with the phenomenon of unreflective action. In Section III, I would like to show that although Dreyfus and McDowell disagree about the role rationality plays in unreflective action, they share a particular interpretation of Aristotle's ideas of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and that they both emphasize the importance of the individual's sensitivity to the demands of the specific situation. McDowell and Dreyfus agree that situation-specific discernment forms the Aristotelian core of an adequate account of unreflective action. A thorough understanding of this is important because it forms the "lean

and mean” core of the integrative account of unreflective action that I envision.

In Sections IV to VI, I will argue that although McDowell’s account of rationality and conceptuality in a strong sense is not wrong, it is limited insofar as it does not completely take into account the characteristics of the phenomenon of unreflective action. In fact, McDowell’s account of these strong notions results in tensions when it is confronted with good phenomenological descriptions of unreflective action. Moreover, in Sections V and VI, I will try to understand why McDowell, who generally manifests an outstanding feeling for the phenomena, is so eager to claim that concepts in his strong sense do play a role in unreflective action. He seems to fear that without a role for conceptuality we would not be able to place unreflective action in the category called space of reasons, being rather forced to see it as determined by disenchanted causal interaction. This would block an account of its freedom, rationality and normativity. Yet, although as a general approach this may be fine for his purpose, the tensions just mentioned suggest that it is not an optimal solution in the case of unreflective action. An account that does justice to unreflective action on its own terms, i.e., by focusing on its non-propositional responsiveness to normative significance, rather than on the terms of reflective accounts of intentionality, does not produce such tensions. This basically amounts to an alternative presentation of the phenomena, a presentation for another purpose (*viz.* doing full justice to the particularities of unreflective action) than the one McDowell is primarily interested in.

## II. The relevance of a tailored account of unreflective action

Dreyfus and McDowell have a lot in common. Both philosophers emphasize the situated nature of our engagements with the world. They share a non-skeptical reading of Wittgenstein’s ideas on rule-following and stress that normativity always already plays a role, even in the bedrock of unreflective action. They accept that unreflective activity is “pervasively bodily” (McDowell, 2007b, p. 370). Moreover, they agree that unreflective action of humans and non-human animals involves responsiveness to affordances.<sup>4</sup> And even though they acknowledge the importance and success of the empirical sciences, they presumably both believe in an irreducible role for phenomenology.<sup>5</sup> This last commonality might be less obvious than the others, but McDowell’s commitment to phenomenology follows from his Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy, as I will show in the second part of Section II. First, however, I will take a closer look at the relevance of a custom-tailored account of unreflective action.

Why do we need an account of unreflective action on its own terms rather than in the more general terms that philosophers like McDowell use for understanding reflective intentionality? Over the course of this paper it will

become clear that without such a tailored account we will not be able to understand how we simply do things intelligently, yet without explicit thought. For example, we will not be able to understand how it is possible to act normatively in a more or less instinctive way; how it is possible to follow a rule “blindly” (Wittgenstein, 1953; cf. Rietveld, 2008c). The non-propositional (bodily or “motor”) intentionality (Merleau-Ponty, 2002/1945; Dreyfus, 2002a, 2002b; Kelly, 2005; Thompson, 2007; Thybo Jensen, 2009) of unreflective action is sufficiently different from the intentionality of explicit thought and reflective action to make the development of a tailored conceptual framework worthwhile. We will see that McDowell’s conceptual framework, which was developed for understanding reflective intentionality, does not fit in well with the phenomenon of unreflective action. Applying McDowell’s heavy framework where the subtleties of unreflective human behavior in context are concerned is sometimes like repairing a torn spider’s web with one’s fingers (cf. Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, p.106. Henceforth PI).

The tensions resulting from McDowell’s use of some of his technical notions, such as for instance conceptuality, in the context of unreflective action have been the main issue in his debate with Dreyfus. Dreyfus’ most important arguments against McDowell’s account are based on the phenomenology of unreflective action. However, we must not forget that McDowell maintains his conceptual framework for a reason: it is his way of making sure that unreflective action is not misunderstood as a brute causal event. Could an account of unreflective action on its own (explicitly non-propositional) terms make it possible to develop a better fitting and more concise conceptual framework that does justice to its specific phenomenology and normativity? Would such a tailored account, rather than thinking in terms of the established categories of the philosophy of thought and reflective action, avoid problems in understanding unreflective action? Let me give an example of a misunderstanding that arose in the debate between McDowell and Dreyfus.

Their debate focuses on McDowell’s claims that, in the case of humans, unreflective bodily coping is conceptual and that such unreflective action is permeated with rationality and mindedness. McDowell holds that in unreflective action there is no reasoning but, nevertheless, there is responsiveness to reasons. Given that according to Dreyfus these reasons do not have any phenomenological reality for the skilled individual during our unreflective performances, he sees no other way to interpret the individual’s responsiveness to reasons than by saying that for McDowell reasons have become habits that influence activity:

McDowell concludes that, [. . . t]hanks to our inculcation into our culture, we become sensitive to reasons, which then influence our “habits of thought and action”.

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. (Dreyfus, 2005, pp. 50–51, quoting McDowell, 1996, p. 84)

One may respond to this by saying that Dreyfus should have known that McDowell's notion of "responsiveness to reasons" does not mean that reasons (neither general nor situation-specific) somehow *influence* the actions of an expert, in this case Aristotle's practically wise person, the *phronimos*.<sup>6</sup> However, the fact remains that in unreflective action, responsiveness to reasons is something that is certainly not open to view, to use Wittgenstein's expression. Unlike responsiveness to normative significance, responsiveness to reasons is not experienced by us in unreflective action. That makes "responsiveness to reasons" an abstract, theory-dependent and potentially misleading term.

This example shows that misunderstandings can easily arise as a result of the fact that McDowell's conceptual framework for the philosophy of thought and reflective intentionality does not match well with the phenomenology of unreflective action. Could an account that describes unreflective action on its own terms, which uses a different and sparser conceptual framework, avoid this type of problem? Would not an account of unreflective action that does not give the central role to responsiveness to reasons but to responsiveness to normative significance be a better account?

In the final part of this section I will try to clarify why McDowell cares about the phenomenology of unreflective action. Most of Dreyfus' arguments against McDowell's framework are phenomenological. The phenomenology of unreflective action plays a major role because, as mentioned above, tensions arise when McDowell's account is confronted with the phenomena. For this reason it makes sense to try to understand why McDowell should care about this type of argument at all. Why would it matter to him that there is a tension between this phenomenology and his framework of intentionality? My claim is that McDowell's commitment to phenomenological accuracy follows from his Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy. Wittgenstein has a role for a certain form of phenomenology that is important for McDowell, because it is what remains of philosophy in the hypothetical situation in which all ungrounded or mistaken philosophical assumptions have been rejected. Let me elaborate on this.

What would Wittgenstein's form of everyday phenomenological description of behavior be in its most minimal form? In the sections of PI that deal with his method of philosophy, Wittgenstein suggests the following:

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use [. . .]; it can in the end only describe it. [. . .]

It leaves everything as it is. (PI 124)

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.

Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. (PI 126)

But even though “everything lies open to view” (PI 126), this type of “everyday phenomenology” (Thornton, 2004, p. 19) *cannot* somehow simply “reassert itself”, as was suggested by McDowell according to Tim Thornton (2004, p. 19).<sup>7</sup> At least not if Thornton or McDowell means by “reassert itself” that the reasserting happens automatically or is obvious and effortless. Someone has to do the phenomenological work. A phenomenological description of behavior in the context of “the whole hurly-burly”<sup>8</sup> of activity does not appear automatically, but is an ordering of phenomena generated by someone from a certain point of view and for a particular purpose (compare PI 127). It is “an order with a particular end in view; one out of many possible orders; not *the* order” (PI 132). Moreover, Wittgenstein reminds us that such an ordering of phenomena is not as obvious as it may seem. It is very hard to do it well, because we often *fail* to see what is most important for our everyday dealings with the world, precisely because of our familiarity with the everyday world.<sup>9</sup> Mark Wrathall (2005) mentions an example of something familiar that remained unnoticed for centuries. Only relatively recently have painters found out that the light in the eye of a painted figure makes a huge difference to our experience of the expressive quality of the painting.

Rejecting the assumption that everyday phenomenology simply reasserts itself when all Wittgensteinian therapy has fulfilled its task is important, because it helps to understand McDowell’s commitment to and appreciation of phenomenological insights, which is a recurrent theme in his work.<sup>10</sup> According to McDowell the deepest dualism, the one that is the source of all the familiar dualisms of modern philosophy (mind and world, subject and object, mind and body, etc.), is “a dualism of norm and nature” (McDowell, 1996, p. 93). Even after all the assumptions on which this dualism depends have been undermined, there is still work to be done for philosophers: contributing to the difficult task of a correct everyday phenomenology of norms in (re-enchanting) nature.

### III. An Aristotelian framework of unreflective action

Responding to relevant affordances (or solicitations) can be seen as a paradigmatic form of unreflective action (Rietveld, 2008b). A skilled individual’s response to an affordance in context can be understood as a minimal episode of skillful action. As mentioned in the introduction, McDowell and Dreyfus agree that “our perceptual openness to affordances [. . .] is necessarily bound up with our embodied coping skills” and that we share this with other

animals (McDowell, 2007a, p. 344). In his paper “What myth?” (2007a) McDowell is responding to Dreyfus’ (2005) APA Pacific Division Presidential Address. McDowell stresses that, contrary to what Dreyfus had suggested in that lecture, for him unreflective action is not situation-independent. Both McDowell and Dreyfus have developed their understanding of unreflective action on the basis of Aristotle’s ideas on *phronesis*. Let me elaborate on the Aristotelian common ground of sensitivity to the specific situation that McDowell and Dreyfus share. This aspect of *phronesis* can function as a good starting point for a new account of unreflective action. In this section I will also discuss their ideas on the role of rationality in *phronesis*.

McDowell and Dreyfus agree that an excellent example of human skillful action and expertise is provided by Aristotle’s *phronimos*, the agent of *phronesis*. In a specific situation, the unreflective action of this ethical expert somehow<sup>11</sup> takes not only all relevant virtues into account (friendship, justice, etc.), but on top of that also the right time, the right way of acting, etc., and all this in relation to ourselves (see for example Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, henceforth NE, NE 1106b21-b24, NE 1107a1-a3). The content of practical wisdom cannot

be captured in general prescriptions for conduct, determinately expressible independently of the concrete situations in which the *phronimos* is called on to act. (McDowell, 2007a, p. 340)

More surprisingly perhaps, it is not only Dreyfus but also McDowell who agrees with Heidegger’s interpretation of Aristotle’s ideas on practical wisdom as being sensitive to a very *rich* as well as a highly specific situation. McDowell puts it as follows:

Heidegger depicts Aristotelian practical wisdom as, in Dreyfus’ words, ‘a kind of understanding that makes possible an immediate response to the full concrete situation’. Dreyfus quotes Heidegger saying this: ‘[The *phronimos*. . . ] is determined by his situation in the largest sense. [ . . . ] The circumstances, the givens, the times and the people vary. The meaning of the action [ . . . ] varies as well [ . . . ]. It is precisely the achievement of *phronēsis* to disclose the [individual] as acting *now* in the *full* situation within which he acts.’ (McDowell, 2007a, p. 340, citing Dreyfus, 2005, p. 51, which contains a quote from Heidegger, 1997, p. 101, Dreyfus’ italics).

McDowell comments on this, saying: “But that is just how I understand Aristotelian practical wisdom” (McDowell, 2007a, p. 340). The *phronimos* does not need to deliberate prior to acting, because he *sees* what is the right thing to do in what Aristotle (NE 1142a25) calls the “ultimate particular thing”, namely the concrete situation (McDowell, 2007a, p. 340). He possesses

a “concretely situation-specific discernment” and is therefore able to do justice to the full situation (2007a, p. 340).

According to both Dreyfus and McDowell, the *phronimos* gets things right thanks to a “reliable sensitivity” to the demands of the specific situation (Thornton, 2004, p. 92, McDowell, 1998, Dreyfus, 2005, p. 54). McDowell explains that this sensitivity has to encompass *all* the virtues and is therefore best understood in a holistic way, as an acquired “single complex sensitivity” (McDowell, 1998, p. 53; Thornton, 2004, p. 93). What the *phronimos* is sensitive to depends on his concerns in the specific situation. In order to understand why the *phronimos* responds to one affordance rather than another we, as observers, have to try to understand the situation as far as possible from his perspective, that is, in accordance with his concerns and capacities.

Perceptual sensitivity is crucial in McDowell’s account of *phronesis*, because ultimately that determines what the *phronimos* sees as the relevant aspect of the situation; why he responds to this feature rather than that feature. I would like to suggest that this salient feature is best understood as the relevant affordance soliciting action, because, as a result of perceiving it, the *phronimos* “is moved to act by this concern rather than that one” (McDowell, 1998, p. 68).

This makes clear that McDowell’s account of *phronesis* does not posit intermediary *propositional* reasons that divorce the acting individual from the motivating world. Rather, the perceived aspect of the situation directly motivates a correct response. Thornton describes McDowell’s position as follows:

[*Phronesis*] involves seeing, in the situation, specific features that call for a specific response. [. . .] It is merely a product of scientism to assume that the world cannot contain features whose perception includes motivational factors. (Thornton, 2004, p. 94).

I understand this way of acting of the *phronimos* as a form of sensitivity-based appreciation of the particular situation, which means that he simply perceives solicitation x (rather than solicitation y or z) and is immediately drawn to respond to it (he is “moved to act”, McDowell, 1998, p. 68). A particular aspect of the individual’s “conception of how to live shows itself”, in that he responds to this solicitation rather than to another possible solicitation (cf. McDowell, 1998, pp. 68–69). More generally, McDowell holds that training and experience enrich “one’s sensitivities to kinds of similarities between situations [. . .]” (McDowell, 1998, p. 64). It is interesting to note that this account of situation-specific discernment is very similar to Dreyfus’ Merleau-Pontian ideas on sensitivity to relevance in the situation (Dreyfus, 2007c; Merleau-Ponty, 2002/1945).

To get the whole picture of the Aristotelian common ground shared by Dreyfus and McDowell, it is also important to note that the latter appears to

agree with the Heideggerian interpretation of Aristotelian practical wisdom as “a kind of *understanding*” (Dreyfus’ 2005, as cited in McDowell, 2007a, p. 340, my italics). This notion of understanding means, as Dreyfus explained in the lecture to which McDowell responds, expressing a kind of know-how or performing in a skilled way (Dreyfus, 2005, p. 59). Finally, with a bit of reciprocal goodwill McDowell and Dreyfus should be able to agree that *phronesis* is a *habitus*, an ingrained skill, or a set of skills acquired in socio-cultural practice, the learning process that McDowell calls *Bildung*. *Phronesis* amounts to “the habit of responding to situations as *phronēsis* requires” (McDowell, 2007a, p. 341).

McDowell and Dreyfus, however, have a difference of opinion about the roles of rationality and concepts in such understanding. I will briefly explain McDowell’s particular use of the notion of rationality and Dreyfus’ criticism of it, before turning to the role of rationality in *phronesis*. The issue of conceptuality will be discussed in Section IV.

McDowell’s use of the notion of concepts should be understood in connection with his particular understanding of rationality (2007c, p. 3), i.e., situation-specific yet “strong rationality” in unreflective action. McDowell (1996) sees the normal mature human being as a rational animal. In the process of upbringing or *Bildung* one is initiated in a tradition and language, and acquires a second nature of a distinctively rational form. Importantly, the acquisition of conceptual capacities is dependent upon language-acquisition (McDowell, 1996, pp. 125–26). Pre-linguistic children do not possess concepts in McDowell’s strong sense. Moreover, once acquired, conceptual capacities belong to a linguistic or reflective faculty (McDowell, 1996, p. 49).

Let me briefly mention the context in which McDowell introduces the notion of *Bildung* in *Mind and World*. He uses this notion to “defuse the fear of supernaturalism” (1996, p. 84) that some might experience as a result of his picture of responsiveness to the demands of reason. He wants to show that the normal maturation of human beings, their acquisition of second nature, moulds “motivational and evaluative propensities”, (McDowell, 1998a, p. 185), and leads to sensitivity to the demands of reason, which therefore is not something supernatural or occult. To quote him:

[T]he very idea of sensitivity to real demands of reason looks spooky, unless we can reconstruct it from materials that are naturalistic in the relevant sense. [. . . O]rdinary upbringing can shape the actions and thoughts of human beings in a way that brings these demands in view. (McDowell, 1996, p. 82)

The notion of *Bildung* makes comprehensible that responsiveness to norms is not spooky. According to McDowell, we will avoid the dualism of norms and nature if we keep *Bildung* in the back of our minds, in other words, if we do not forget second nature. *Bildung* gives one the *capacity* to step back and

reflect. The core of McDowell's notion of rationality is that mature human beings are different from what he calls "mere animals" and what I will simply call "animals", because they have the capacity to be responsive "to reasons as such" (2007b, p. 366). A mature human being (henceforth "human") has the capacity to step back and assess whether or not her putative reasons warrant the action she is inclined to take (McDowell, 2007c, pp. 1–2). We should keep in mind that this type of rationality is situation-specific according to McDowell (2007a, pp. 4–6). Moreover, it does not need any deliberation, reasoning or words:

When one is unreflectively immersed, one is exactly not exercising the ability to step back. [. . .] Nothing is discursively explicit in these goings-on [. . .] (McDowell, 2007b, p. 366).

McDowell calls the specific type of rationality in which he is interested "rationality in the strong sense" (hereinafter for the sake of brevity "strong rationality") in order to distinguish it from other types of rationality.<sup>12</sup> McDowell claims that in the case of humans, but not animals, strong rationality *permeates* action, including unreflective action (2007a, p. 339, 2007b, p. 368). McDowell tries to explain how it makes a difference that activity is permeated with strong rationality by means of the following example of a skill that both humans and animals can possess:

[C]onsider catching a flying object. When a rational agent catches a frisbee, she is realizing a concept of a thing to do. [. . .] Of, say, catching *this*. (Think of a case in which, as one walks across a park, a frisbee flies towards one, and one catches it in the spur of the moment.) When a dog catches a frisbee, he is not realizing any practical concept; in the relevant sense, he has none. The point of saying that the rational agent, unlike the dog, is realizing a concept in doing what she does is that her doing, under a specification that captures the content of the practical concept that she is realizing, comes within the scope of her practical rationality – even if only in that, if asked why she caught the frisbee, she would answer "No particular reason; I just felt like it". (McDowell, 2007b, pp. 368–69)

Even when we are engaged in absorbed coping and do not step back and reflect, strong rationality is nevertheless "operative" or "at work", according to McDowell, because a rational animal *could* step back (2007b, p. 366; McDowell, 2007a, p. 344).

Dreyfus criticizes McDowell's claim that the ability to use linguistic concepts is in some way "operative" in unreflective action:

Capacities are exercised on occasion, but that does not allow one to conclude that, even when they are not exercised, they are, nonetheless,

“operative” and thus pervade all our activities. Capacities can’t pervade anything. (Dreyfus, 2007b, p. 372)

Moreover, according to Dreyfus, in a flow of skillful action one could not step back without disturbing one’s responsiveness to solicitations and one’s performance.

Let us return to the role of rationality in the paradigm case of *phronesis*. McDowell claims that the actions of the *phronimos* are rational also in unreflective action without prior deliberation.

We [should] stop assuming that the virtuous person’s judgement is the result of balancing reasons for and against. The view of a situation that he arrives at by exercising his sensitivity is one in which some aspect of the situation is seen as constituting a reason for acting in some way [ . . . ] (McDowell, 1998, p. 56)

That this reason for acting does not need to be *experienced* as a reason in the unreflective episode should by now be sufficiently clear. McDowell is not talking about the lived experience of the individual here.

Practical wisdom does not need maxims which operate in the background, because *phronesis*, according to McDowell (2007a, p. 351), does not involve rationality behind action but rationality “*in action*”. This basically means that the rationality of the *phronimos* “is displayed in what he does” (2007a, p. 341). So for McDowell, rationality in unreflective action is neither detached, nor discursively explicit, but nevertheless it does *show itself* in the activity. Moreover, the Aristotelian notion of second nature is crucial in McDowell’s account of *phronesis*, because for him *phronesis* in unreflective action is a case of “a properly formed practical intellect at work” (McDowell, 2007a, p. 342). Furthermore, McDowell stresses that for Aristotle an emphasis on situation-specific discernment is not incompatible with the *possibility* of situation-specific linguistic expression (2007a, p. 342). The possibility of putting discernment into words plays a crucial role in McDowell’s conceptual framework (see Section IV).

To conclude, McDowell and Dreyfus concur that an expert in action is not applying a general maxim or subsuming cases under rules that could be articulated by abstracting from the specific situation. Situation-specific discernment and responsiveness to relevant affordances form the core of the Aristotelian common ground that the two philosophers share. *Bildung* or upbringing, training and experience are accumulated in embodied skills, which reveals that there is nothing mysterious in this sensitivity.

As far as their disagreement on rationality is concerned, Dreyfus is, in my opinion, right that McDowell’s frisbee-case does not succeed in making it very plausible that a human is (and that a dog is not) *realizing* a practical concept *during* the act of catching a frisbee. If we focus on what is displayed

in action, as McDowell (2007a, p. 341) rightly suggested that we should, then what this example does make clear is that rationality, in McDowell's strong sense that distinguishes rational animals from "mere animals", is only displayed in her exercising the capacity to step back or to reflect.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the only rationality shown in this example, over and above the rationality of catching the frisbee adequately, was that the person was able to say at a *later* moment why she caught it.

To make progress on the nature of rationality in unreflective action, it would be useful to examine what we can learn about rationality from Wittgenstein's discussion of "blind" rule-following (PI 217, 219; see Rietveld, 2008c) for a discussion of the non-propositional normativity of blind rule following). That investigation will have to wait for another occasion, however. I now turn to the discussion of some other aspects of unreflective action.

#### IV. McDowell and Dreyfus on aspects of unreflective action

We have seen that situation-specific discernment characterizes *phronesis* in unreflective action. Discernment in this sense is not definable because that would impose a certain generality that this form of perception does not have. This type of (perceptual) understanding nevertheless allows for correct "situation-specific conceptual articulation", according to McDowell (2007a, p. 342). Dreyfus (2007a, 2007b) would probably be willing to accept this, as long as conceptual articulation occurs *post hoc*, is partial and involves a transformation of pre-reflective experience. But McDowell's claim is stronger. Their disagreement regarding conceptuality arises primarily because McDowell claims that *in* an episode of such unreflective action, concepts, in the sense that will be introduced below, are "operative".

Let me now first introduce McDowell's notion of concepts. In the second part of this section I will assess the suitability of this notion for unreflective action. I hope to show convincingly that there is a certain tension in his account. In the final two sections (V and VI) of this paper, Charles Taylor's comments on McDowell will be used to shed light on the origins of this tension and suggest an important distinction that could help McDowell to realize his main aim of overcoming the assumptions underlying the dualism between norm and nature, while also doing justice to the phenomena.

Concepts, according to McDowell, are operative in all perception and action, including the most unreflective perception and action. As we have seen in Section III, his (1996) notion of concepts is language-dependent (which is why I will sometimes speak of "linguistic concepts"), but it is so in a subtle way that contests the idea that we have a word ready for every aspect of our experience. He does not claim,

that we are ready in advance with words for every aspect of the content of our experience, nor that we could equip ourselves with words for every aspect of the content of our experience.<sup>14</sup> (McDowell, 2007a, p. 348)

McDowell accepts that our pre-reflective experience will never actually be articulated fully. Nevertheless, he holds, we can always articulate a part of it, because either we already have words for aspects of the experience, or we can use our language abilities to make up new expressions that could put some aspects into words. What is crucial for McDowell, is his claim that the content of our experience, even in unreflective action, is present in a form that is *suitable* for linguistic expression. In McDowell's own words:

What is important is this: if an experience is world-disclosing, which implies that it is categorically unified, *all* its content is present in a *form* in which, as I put before, it is suitable to constitute contents of conceptual capacities. All that would be needed for a bit of it to come to constitute the content of a conceptual capacity, [. . .] is for it to be focused on and made to be the meaning of a linguistic expression. (2007a, pp. 347–48)

The experience of a person who has acquired language is of a form that opens the *potential* for linguistically articulating aspects of the experience, even in cases in which the right words are not yet available. McDowell's idea of conceptual capacities is basically not about the actual link between aspects of content and linguistic expression, but about the *possible* link between aspects of content and linguistic expression. To quote McDowell again:

[L]anguage enables us to have experience that [. . .] has content that is conceptual in the sense that I have introduced [. . .] No aspect is unnameable, but that does not require us to pretend to make sense of an ideal position in which we have a name for every aspect, let alone to be in such a position. (2007a, p. 348)

McDowell's emphasis on this potential (as opposed to the actuality) of conceptualization/articulation implies that we "do not need to have words for all the content that is conceptually available to us" (McDowell, 2007a, p. 348).<sup>15</sup>

Does McDowell make clear why it would make sense to say that concepts are *operative* in unreflective action? To answer this question I now turn to a tension in McDowell's account of concepts in the case of absorbed coping. This tension has to do with friction between his account and the phenomenology of unreflective action. To distinguish McDowell's notion of concepts from other notions of concepts, I will refer to his notion by the name of

“strong concepts”. It is an apt name because it fits in with his idea that concepts are always involved in perception and action, and because it links up with his views on rationality in the strong sense (strong rationality) which we encountered earlier and on spontaneity in the strong sense (strong spontaneity) which we will encounter below. It aims to point out or flag that a different (weaker or just different) notion of concepts could play a role in understanding phenomena (for example animal behavior) other than the one McDowell is primarily interested in.

The disagreement between McDowell and Dreyfus on concepts has its origin in McDowell’s claim that concepts are not only operative in cases of reflection on the experience that emerges from unreflective action and as soon as we use language to express aspects of that experience after the fact. They are also operative when we do not step back. That is to say, concepts in his language-related sense are operative at every stage of an episode of unreflective action. McDowell (2007b) wants to correct Dreyfus’ impression that in unreflective experience, in an episode of absorbed coping, conceptual abilities are not operative. To put it clearly, I would like to use McDowell’s own words:

When one is unreflectively immersed, one is exactly not exercising the ability to step back. But even so the capacities operative in one’s perceiving or acting are conceptual, and their operations are conceptual.

Nothing is discursively explicit in these goings-on, so it might seem natural to say, as Dreyfus does, that my view is that they are *implicitly* conceptual. But it is easy to hear that as amounting to ‘only implicitly conceptual’, with an implication that conceptuality would be properly on the scene only after something had been made explicit in discourse or discursive thought – that is, only after the subject had exercised the ability to step back. And that is not my view at all. (2007b, pp. 366–67)

To summarize this, McDowell clearly holds that there is more to linguistic or strong conceptuality than potential linguistic articulation at a later moment. Yet, it does not become clear what that would be. In particular his claim that “the capacities operative in one’s perceiving or acting are conceptual, and their operations are conceptual” is hard to understand.

Another collision with the phenomenology of unreflective action occurs when McDowell (2007b) talks about the “*realization*” of a “*practical*” concept in unreflective action. We encountered this in Section III in the context of McDowell’s ideas on rationality. Examples of such practical concepts are in the baseball case “throwing efficiently to first base” and in the frisbee case “catching *this*” (McDowell, 2007b, p. 367, p. 369). According to McDowell,

The practical concepts realized in acting are concepts of things to do. Realizing such a concept is doing the thing in question [ . . . ] (McDowell, 2007b, p. 367)

Again the quotations suggest that there is more to conceptuality than potential later linguistic expression. But when McDowell explains why he is so eager to say that we realize a concept in unreflective action, he only repeats that we, but not a dog, can articulate after the fact aspects of the experience as well as reasons. That is to say that he does not mention anything related to what happens *in* an episode of unreflective action.<sup>16</sup> In line with his overall emphasis on conceptual rationality McDowell (2007b) is, in his response to Dreyfus (2007a), more concerned with—to put it negatively—denying that rationality is linked to detachment, than with—to put it positively—explaining what exactly is the way in which conceptual capacities are operative in unreflective action, that is, other than the (undebated, as far as I am concerned) potential for linguistically expressing aspects of the experience *after* the action. With respect to conceptuality, McDowell's frisbee example only makes clear what in fact it means to be able to articulate experience, namely voicing reasons afterwards. (Or, as in his example, that there was no particular reason; the person just felt like catching it.)

The conclusion is that McDowell is justified in claiming that humans possess the capacity to articulate aspects of their experience of unreflective action. But he does not give an argument for his phenomenologically questionable further claim that concepts in his strong sense are operative *in* unreflective action. He simply claims it, even though we do not seem to experience any such concepts being *operative*, as Dreyfus (2007b, p. 372) correctly notes. Furthermore, McDowell's (2007b) introduction of "practical concepts" amounts to no more than adding yet another claim, namely that a practical concept is operative (being "realized") in unreflective action. But what remains unclear is this: why should we label the act of doing the thing in question without explicit thought as "conceptual", given that conceptual capacities "belong to [ . . . ] a faculty that is exercised in actively self-critical control of what one thinks [ . . . ]" (McDowell, 1996, p. 49)? Why should we not hold that conceptuality in this linguistic sense only becomes operative after the unreflective episode?

The upshot is that McDowell does not make it plausible that conceptual capacities are *operative* in unreflective action. Thus, in McDowell's account of conceptuality when applied to the case of unreflective action there seems to be a tension, which deserves further investigation.

## V. Taylor's analysis of the tension in McDowell's account of spontaneity

McDowell and Dreyfus disagree about the role of (strong) conceptuality in an episode of unreflective action. I will involve a third philosopher in an

attempt to take the issue further. Charles Taylor is well acquainted with the works of both. He (2002) has written on the subject of McDowell's (1996) account of (unreflective) action and McDowell (2002) has responded to these comments. Taylor calls unreflective action "pre-conceptual", and the type of know-how or understanding involved, "pre-understanding". We will see that the tension in McDowell's account encountered above, was also spotted by Taylor, albeit in a somewhat different form. Taylor's (2002) analysis of the source of this tension is illuminating.

Up to now, the more we have tried to clarify in what ways Dreyfus and McDowell differ, the more agreement we have encountered on the phenomenology of unreflective action. So far I have assumed that it is quite obvious that words do not play a role in an episode of unreflective coping, but let us make sure that Dreyfus and McDowell agree on the absence of an actual use of language. This is relevant because, although unlikely given the agreement about the phenomena so far, McDowell's idea that strong concepts are operative or realized in unreflective action could have been based on an atypical understanding of its phenomenology, in which case there would actually have been far less common ground between them.

McDowell is not very explicit about his ideas on the phenomenology of such an episode of unreflective action. If he holds that words do play any role, for example in "catching this", and Dreyfus that they do not, their disagreement might (at least partially) be explained by different takes on the phenomena. However, Taylor's (2002) phenomenology of absorbed coping and McDowell's (2002) subsequent response suggest that this is not the case. Taylor's ideas on unreflective action are well summarized in this quotation:

Dealing with things pre-conceptually can't involve rational, critical reflection on world or action; it doesn't exhibit Kantian "spontaneity" at its fullest. [. . .] Living with things involves a certain kind of understanding (which we might also call "pre-understanding"). [. . .] As I navigate my way along the path up the hill, my mind totally absorbed anticipating the difficult conversation I'm going to have at my destination, I treat the different features of the terrain as obstacles, supports, openings, invitations to tread more warily, or run freely, etc. [. . . T]hese things have those relevances for me; I know my way about among them.

This is *non-conceptual*; or put another way, language isn't playing any direct role. [. . .] Ordinary coping isn't conceptual. But at the same time, it can't be understood in just inanimate-causal terms. (Taylor, 2002, p. 111, my italics)

This denial of a role for linguistic concepts in the experience of taking account of the context and dealing with affordances makes clear that Taylor

sides with Dreyfus in holding that operative concepts (in McDowell's language-related sense) do not play a necessary role in the phenomenology of unreflective action. In his response to Taylor (2002), McDowell (2002) did not take issue with Taylor's account of the phenomenology. This suggests that the issue between McDowell and Dreyfus is probably not the result of a difference of opinion on the phenomenology of agency in unreflective action, but the result of the earlier-mentioned friction that arises when McDowell's use of the notion of concepts is confronted with the phenomenology as described by Taylor or Dreyfus.

It is important for us that Taylor (2002) makes an effort to understand McDowell's (1996) motivations for using his conceptual framework in the way that he does. Taylor's analysis will help us to see why McDowell (2007b) is nevertheless so eager to claim that such concepts do play a role in unreflective action. Taylor suggests that the resolution of the tensions in McDowell's account could be accomplished via a better understanding of McDowell's use of the notion of "spontaneity":

Perhaps we should probe this latter term more. "Spontaneity" could be reserved for full-fledged conceptual, self-reflective thinking, a restriction which would suit its Kantian origins. But it figures in another way in McDowell's argument [. . .] It seems also to designate [. . .] the *antonym* to brute causal impingings on the organism [. . .] (Taylor, 2002, p. 114, my italics)

I agree with this important analysis. Following up on this, Taylor emphasizes that we ought to distinguish between spontaneity in a strong and in a weak sense. The first way of understanding spontaneity is the strong Kantian notion. This is related to the possibility of stepping back and plays a role when McDowell defines his use of the term "conceptual capacities" (strong concepts).

Taylor proposes to understand McDowell's use of spontaneity in the weak sense as motivated by McDowell's need for the antonym role. Given that we sense and respond to *relevance* even in unreflective or pre-conceptual actions, the perception involved is then, according to Taylor (2002, p. 115), still "participating in the space of reasons", rather than determined by disenchanted causal interaction. This observation by Taylor is of crucial importance in my opinion, because it clarifies McDowell's eagerness to hold on to his notion of operative concepts even though the phenomena suggest that that is questionable: claiming that concepts are operative is McDowell's way of ensuring that unreflective action is not understood in a disenchanted way. Moreover, it emphasizes an important starting point for a more parsimonious alternative: that an episode of unreflective responsiveness to relevant affordances does not occur in the realm of brute causality.

In his response to Taylor, McDowell confirms his need for a way of interacting with the world that is between the purely causal on the one hand, and the reflective on the other, to understand animal behavior and human unreflective action:

I agree with Taylor that there is something between spontaneity in what he calls ‘the strong Kantian sense, turning crucially on conceptual, reflective thought,’ on the one hand, and conformity to Galilean law, on the other. We need this middle ground for thinking about non-human animals, and it is what is supposed to be occupied by pre-understanding even in our case. (McDowell, 2002, p. 283)

With these words McDowell suggests that our understanding of human unreflective action would benefit from a conceptual framework tailored to this “middle ground”. What is important is that he does not react to Taylor by saying that this type of action can simply be grasped fully with the same conceptual framework that he developed for reflective thought. I suggest that a good account of the middle ground is especially important for understanding what normativity, intentionality, freedom, agency and rationality could mean *in* an episode of unreflective action, both in our own case, and in the cases of pre-linguistic children and animals, i.e., also independently of any possible later linguistic articulation.

Note that weak and strong notions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In the case of spontaneity, for example, McDowell can hold that our understanding of unreflective action benefits from using the notion of weak spontaneity, without committing himself to denying that humans in unreflective action have the capacity to step back and reflect.

Whereas Taylor writes that unreflective action participates in the space of reasons, I would rather use another term that avoids misunderstandings, such as the ones discussed in Section II, and fits in with the phenomena better. I propose that unreflective action participates in the *sphere of normative significance*.

However, we have seen above that, notwithstanding his earlier agreement with Taylor (2002), in his recent debate with Dreyfus, McDowell (2007a, 2007b) again neglects this need for an account of the middle ground. The still prevalent need for notions that signal that we are not in the realm of brute causality presumably motivates McDowell’s phenomenologically questionable talk of *operations* of concepts in such action. I will call notions that have the role of flagging this “weak notions”.

## **VI. Generalizing Taylor’s insight: McDowell’s motivation for his notion of operative conceptuality in unreflective action**

McDowell’s conceptual framework for reflective intentionality consists of a set of notions that are intimately related and always show up together:

rational animals are characterized by (strong) rationality, responsiveness to reasons as such, spontaneity, conceptual capacities, subjectivity, and self-determination. Given such a starting point it is predictable that McDowell expects them to be present all together not only in reflective action, but always when a mature human being (rational animal) is involved. Even when we do not experience any direct role for language, our unreflective action participates not in the space of causation but in the space of reasons and therefore we *must have*, McDowell seems to say, some form of conceptuality on the scene.

McDowell's ideas on conceptuality parallel his ideas on spontaneity. The importance of a conceptual framework tailored for the middle ground (unreflective action), combined with the actual absence of this middle ground in his debate with Dreyfus, makes it possible to make sense of McDowell's various uses of the notion of conceptual capacities. He seems to stretch the use of some notions in his conceptual framework for reflective intentionality in order to be able to integrate unreflective action.

Both spontaneity and conceptuality should be understood in relation to McDowell's primary interest in strong rationality.<sup>17</sup> Both Kantian freedom and having conceptual capacities require being potentially reflective:

[I]t is important that the freedom I claim [mere animals] lack is precisely Kantian spontaneity, the freedom that consists in potentially reflective responsiveness to putative norms of reason. (McDowell, 1996, p. 182)

When McDowell (2007b, p. 369) says that a dog does not have any *practical concept* "in the relevant sense", we have to understand this in McDowell's strong sense of fully-fledged conceptual, which is related to the possibility of reflection using language. And this strong sense of conceptual is also the correct one for understanding the passage in which a frisbee-catching human is contrasted with a frisbee-catching dog (presented in Section III). This example is centered around the distinction between a rational animal and a "mere animal", and the former's possibility to reflect on the earlier action, to use words and to give reasons.

Both strong conceptual capacities and strong spontaneity emphasize the importance of after-the-fact operations: of a (potential) linguistic articulation of reasons and of aspects of the content of experience, and operations of practical rationality. But whereas in the case of rationality McDowell makes clear that he is primarily interested in strong rationality, he does not want to say that he is primarily interested in after-the-fact operations of conceptual capacities, presumably for the reasons articulated by Taylor.

Taylor's analysis seems to suggest that another way of understanding "conceptual" in the frisbee-case could be conceptual in a *weak* sense, along the lines of spontaneity in a weak sense. Perhaps the main role of "weak

conceptuality” would then be to signal that unreflective action is not a brute causal event. However, I think the real lesson we can learn from Taylor (2002) is that we should develop an account tailored to the specific needs of unreflective action (the *middle ground*). As noted above, the relevant conceptual framework for doing justice to this type of action on its own terms can be more parsimonious than the complex of concepts that McDowell uses for characterizing reflective intentionality if we take responsiveness to relevant affordances as our starting point. The details of this alternative will have to be developed elsewhere (for an account of non-propositional normativity see e.g., Rietveld, 2008c). What matters is that the account as a whole makes clear that unreflective action is not a brute causal event but participates in the *sphere of normative significance* thanks to our past experience and training as well as our current engagement in socio-cultural practices and appreciation of the situation. Responsiveness to significance (including normative significance) should therefore be one of the central notions. With responsiveness to normative significance in place and the dualism of norms and nature avoided, the need for and role of other notions, such as freedom, conceptuality and rationality, should be investigated.

It’s time to sum up. When McDowell speaks about a rational agent *realizing a practical concept* in unreflective action, for example when catching a frisbee, this talk about operative concepts is presumably evoked to play the role of an antonym to a brute causal event. However, at least for the specific case of unreflective action, the notion of responsiveness to normative significance would be better suited to play this role. The starting point for understanding intentionality and bodily agency should be neither the conceptual—non-conceptual dichotomy, nor the space of reasons—realm of law distinction, but responsiveness to relevant affordances in the concrete situation.

## VII. Conclusion

McDowell and Dreyfus concur that an individual in skillful action is not applying a general maxim or subsuming cases under rules that could be articulated by abstracting from the specific situation. Situation-specific discernment and responsiveness to relevant affordances form the core of the Aristotelian common ground that the two philosophers share. It is what characterizes *phronesis* in unreflective action. *Bildung* makes it understandable that there is nothing mysterious about this sensitivity. McDowell and Dreyfus, however, have a difference of opinion about the roles of rationality and concepts in such understanding.

McDowell wants a place for unreflective action between the purely causal and the reflective, which still participates in the space of reasons. However, rather than develop a tailored account for unreflective action, we have seen that in his debate with Dreyfus he stretches his conceptual framework for reflective intentionality in an attempt to place unreflective action in the

space of reasons. Even though we do not experience any role for linguistic concepts, McDowell is eager to claim that such concepts are *operative* in unreflective action. The resulting tensions in McDowell's account have everything to do with conflicts between this stretched account and the phenomenology of unreflective action.

McDowell's account of unreflective action, at least in so far as it emerges from his debate with Dreyfus, is not wrong, but does not fit in well with the phenomena. Given that he cares about getting the phenomena right, I expect that he would be interested in the potential for improvement. An account tailored for the middle ground does better justice to the phenomenon of unreflective coping, by describing it *on its own terms*, rather than on the terms of reflective thought. This basically amounts to an alternative presentation of the phenomena, for another purpose than the one McDowell was primarily interested in.

Although in his discussion with Taylor (2002) McDowell (2002) acknowledges the need for an account of the middle ground in order to do justice to our (pre-) understanding in unreflective action, he does not develop a tailored framework for this in his discussion with Dreyfus. I suggest that we should develop such an account based on the Aristotelian-Wittgensteinian common ground. Understood thus, unreflective action, with its characteristic responsiveness to relevant affordances, occupies a middle ground between "inanimate-causal interaction and full-fledged conceptual-critical thinking" (Taylor, 2002, p. 114).

Several open questions remain. What would be the roles for conceptual capacities and rationality in such an account? Something else that deserves further investigation elsewhere is the link between the individual's responsiveness to normative significance and what McDowell (1998, p. 53) calls a reliable "single complex sensitivity" to the demands of the situation.<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

1. Of course not all of our life is spent in a state of unreflective action. Sometimes we lack the relevant skills, things go very wrong, or situations are too complex, thus forcing us to reflect or deliberate explicitly. However, I will restrict myself as much as possible to investigating those episodes where the activities of a skillful individual unfold adequately without reflection on his or her part.
2. Skillful coping in Dreyfus' phenomenological account is a form of skill-based unproblematic and unreflective activity. He (1991, p. 93) gives the following examples: playing an instrument (the piano), skiing, driving to one's office, and brushing one's teeth. These activities are purposeful without requiring any representation of a goal. *Absorbed* coping is not just coping in an engaged or involved way, but is skillful coping at its best.
3. This paper was submitted and accepted before John McDowell (2008) changed his position on the content of experiences and claimed that such content is not propositionally structured, as he had assumed previously, but intuitionally structured. My paper is limited to a discussion of McDowell's old position, which is the position that got the debate between McDowell and Dreyfus started and the position Dreyfus has been arguing against all the time. To me it seems that McDowell's new position is more promising than his old one, because the assumption of propositionally structured content did not

fit in well with the phenomena. However, a discussion of intuitional content will have to wait for another occasion.

4. McDowell, for instance, recently wrote: “[R]esponsiveness to affordances, necessarily bound up with embodied coping skills, is something we share with other animals” (McDowell, 2007a, p. 344). One essential difference between our responsiveness to affordances and that of non-language using animals is that we can be solicited by possibilities for action that are related to our linguistic abilities.
5. In order to include a Wittgensteinian form of phenomenology, in this paper my use of the term “phenomenology” is quite broad, namely the description and analysis of lived experience. This does not necessarily require a first-person or second-person perspective because an individual’s lived experience can normally also be understood and described by another person sufficiently familiar with one’s behavioral situation. Wittgenstein’s phenomenology is mostly, but not always, given from this latter perspective. Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus mostly start from the first-person perspective.
6. I do not want to suggest that *phronesis* is equivalent to expertise in general. Perhaps one could argue, however, that it is equivalent to the specific expertise of acting as *phronesis* requires, because *phronesis* amounts to “the habit of responding to situations as *phronēsis* requires” (McDowell, 2007a, p. 341; but see Gallagher, 2007, for another account than mine).
7. Thornton (2004) does not give a reference here. He mentioned this in his section on what he calls McDowell’s therapeutic conception of philosophical method. Thornton summarizes McDowell’s method of Wittgensteinian philosophical therapy with the following example: “The dualism that produces philosophical unrest is diagnosed as depending on an assumption. [. . .] Because that assumption is ungrounded, it is rejected, and the everyday phenomenology of norms is reinstated without the need for further justificatory philosophy.” (Thornton, 2004, p. 19). This therapy, which aims to give philosophy a kind of peace, is also relevant in the context of moral philosophy. In that context too its result is a return to a form of phenomenology: “Once both of these [neo-Humean and Kantian, ER] assumptions are rejected, McDowell suggests that the phenomenology of value judgement can *reassert itself*” (Thornton, 2004, p. 19, my italics).
8. “How could human behaviour be described? Surely only by showing the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. Not what *one* man is doing *now*, but the whole hurly-burly, is the background against which we see any action, and it determines our judgment, our concepts, and our reactions” (Wittgenstein 1980 - RPPii -, p. 108, # II-629).
9. To quote Wittgenstein: “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck him.—And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful” (PI 129).
10. Let me give one example. McDowell (1994) criticizes another philosopher (Dennett) for giving a misrepresentation of the phenomenology of perception. After analysis and rejection of the assumption that motivated Dennett’s mistake, McDowell concludes: “One striking advantage to be derived from rejecting the idea that conscious perceptual experience is a special kind of access to content that is in the first instance sub-personal, i.e., to the content of events or states in our interiors, is that it enables us to *repossess the phenomenology of perception*” (McDowell, 1994, p. 204, my italics).
11. We will see that *Bildung* makes this “somehow” understandable.
12. Strong rationality (see McDowell, 2007b, p. 366) should be distinguished from the rationality that could be ascribed to animals (for example the rationality involved in fleeing from danger) but also from the more general notion of rationality used in McDowell’s (1998b) discussion of rule-following.

13. Note, by the way, that stepping back does not necessarily imply detachment or separation from practical significance (McDowell, 2007b, p. 369).
14. Given the first of these remarks and McDowell's emphasis on the *possibility* of linguistic articulation, which I will discuss below, he also does not claim, as was suggested by Wrathall (2005, p. 125), that "the world is presented at the outset as being propositionally articulated". Wrathall (2005, p. 117) makes the mistake of assuming that reasons "must be" propositional for McDowell. Since Wrathall explains Merleau-Ponty's notion of motives by contrasting them with reasons, this problematic assumption diminishes the value of his middle ground between causes and reasons for our purposes. Dreyfus characterizes Merleau-Pontian motives by responsiveness to solicitations to act: "[Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'motivation'] names the way we are directly responsive to the [. . .] demands of our situation. In short, it is a name for the way affordances solicit one to act. [. . .] True to the phenomenon of affordance and response, plus the [normative, ER] tendency to achieve maximal grip, Merleau-Ponty is led to introduce, between the space of causes and the space of reasons, what one might call *the space of motivations*" (Dreyfus, 2005a, pp. 56–57). Actions in the space of motivations are not characterized by propositional intentionality but by "motor intentionality": "Merleau-Ponty calls the sort of intentionality definitive of the space of motivations, *motor intentionality*" (Dreyfus, 2005a, p. 64; cf. Thompson, 2007). It is important to see that what I call the "sphere of normative significance" encompasses *both* the space of motivations and the space of reasons, both motor intentionality and propositional intentionality. It is primarily meant to serve as the contrast to the non-normative domain that McDowell needs according to Taylor (to be discussed Sections V and VI).
15. Although it is not directly relevant for understanding unreflective action, I must say that McDowell does not make it very plausible that *all* content is suitable for linguistic articulation. Consider Wittgenstein's coffee aroma-example. In contrast to McDowell (2007a), he (PI 610) does not seem to think that potentially we can put the experience of the aroma of coffee into words. Wittgenstein suggests that, even if we introduce new words, something about the content of this experience will resist articulation.
16. Let me repeat the relevant sentence for the reader's convenience: "The point of saying that the rational agent, unlike the dog, is realizing a concept in doing what she does is that her doing, under a specification that captures the content of the practical concept that she is realizing, comes within the scope of her practical rationality – even if only in that, if asked why she caught the frisbee, she would answer 'No particular reason; I just felt like it'" (McDowell, 2007b, p. 369).
17. The first five sentences of McDowell's (2007a, pp. 338–39) article emphasize the link between conceptual capacities and strong rationality. He (2007b) stresses this link between strong rationality and conceptuality also on the first page of his second response to Dreyfus.
18. I would like to thank Chantal Bax, Giovanna Colombetti, Janna van Grunsven, Olivier Putois, Richard Ridderinkhof, Tim Thornton, Rasmus Thybo Jensen, and Paul Voestermans for helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper. I owe special thanks to Martin Stokhof and Hubert Dreyfus. I did part of the research for this paper during my stay as a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley in 2006 and Harvard University in 2006 and 2008. These research visits were funded by NWO, "Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research". I would like to express my gratitude for awarding these grants.

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