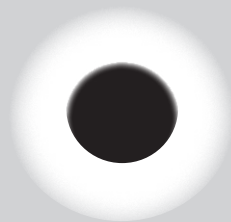


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# Focus Article



# MINDFULNESS AND MINDLESSNESS IN PERFORMANCE

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**Abstract:** I argue that, contra Dreyfus's theory of expert performance and behaviorist interpretations of enactivism, action is not mindless. Rather, empirical and phenomenological studies of athletics, dance and musical performance provide evidence that performance involves specific forms of mindfulness. Philosophically, these issues are addressed in the debate between Dreyfus and McDowell about the very nature of mind. In this paper I'll argue that the phenomenology of performance shows that enactivist conceptions of perception and action are neither behaviorist nor overly cognitivist. Action can involve aspects of mindfulness that do not interrupt embodied performance.

**Key words:** Performance, phenomenology, mindless coping, mindfulness, enactivism

Enactivist approaches to cognition are sometimes accused of being a form of mindless behaviorism. Shapiro (2011; 2014) equates it with «dressed-up behaviorism». Likewise, Hirstein (2015, 250) suggests extended and enactivist views are «new variants of behaviorism». Aizawa (2014) contends that these approaches to embodied cognition are not really about cognition but about behavior. According to Aizawa, for example, classic cognitive science explains behavior in terms of cognition (information processing); enactivism attempts to explain cognition in terms of behavior. Thus, an enactivist explanation of successful navigation through an environment (= behavior) without recourse to representations (= cognition), and only in terms of a 'continuous interactive process of engagement with the environment' (= behavior), is a form of

behaviorism and is «irrelevant to mainstream cognitive science, since it only shows that behavior does not require representation, not that cognition does not require representation» (Aizawa 2014, 37).

This critique is echoed in John McDowell's criticism of Hubert Dreyfus. Their debate concerns whether perception and action and their close link in everyday coping and expert action are mindless/non-conceptual (Dreyfus) or mindful/conceptual (McDowell). In this paper I'll argue that phenomenology, especially the work of Merleau-Ponty, but also more recent research on performance, provides a way to intervene and to show that phenomenologically-inspired enactivist conceptions of perception and action are neither mindless/behavioristic nor overly cognitivist, but do involve aspects of mindfulness that (contra Dreyfus) do not interrupt embodied performance.

I.

## THE DREYFUS DEBATES

Dreyfus is well known for thinking of action and expert performance as mindless rather than mindful. Dreyfus' conception of expertise takes expert performance to involve a highly proficient bodily coping (Dreyfus, Dreyfus 1985). The expert is someone who knows what to do intuitively, without thinking, and without having to explicitly follow rules. Dreyfus models this conception on Aristotelian *phronesis*, which, he explains, is the result of practice, and involves the ability to be mindlessly in the flow. In one example, he suggests that the downhill skier who is engaged in expert performance is in the flow and requires no reflection. Once reflective thinking is introduced, the skier loses his expertise (see Gallagher 2017 for this example).

In 2005 in San Francisco Dreyfus delivered the American Philosophical Association's Presidential Address (Dreyfus 2005). On this occasion he also organized a panel discussion on action and perception, specifically focused on a discussion of Samuel Todes's book *Body and World*. Todes provides an analysis of perception and action with an exclusive emphasis on embodied practices and a complete lack of reference to intersubjectivity. I argued, in the panel discussion, that this carries over into Dreyfus's account of expertise<sup>1</sup>, and is a problem, specifically when it comes to his use of the concept of *phronesis*. For Aristotle, we learn *phronesis*, by hanging around with the right sort of people. We learn to recognize the good, and how to act, by seeing good people act. Since Dreyfus provides no explanation of the role of intersubjectivity or social interaction in his account of expertise, the account is incomplete.

This same issue arises in the debate that Dreyfus has with McDowell – a debate that starts with Dreyfus' Presidential Address, and McDowell's response to it. McDowell argues that perception (and agency) and embodied coping is conceptual/rational, and not as «mindless» as Dreyfus contends. Dreyfus accuses McDowell of accepting the «myth of the mental» and he thinks that he ignores non-conceptual, situated embodied coping. McDowell responds, however, that rationality does not have to be situation independent, and this can be seen in the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* as a model for situated rationality. According to McDowell, however, *phronesis* involves an initiation into conceptual capacities. In contrast, Dreyfus cites Heidegger's concept of *phronesis*: 'a kind of understanding that makes possible an immediate response to the full concrete situation'. For Heidegger, the situation does much of the work. McDowell does not deny this, but he doesn't take it to decide the issue of whether perception/action is conceptual/rational or not. Indeed, he acknowledges the influence of Heidegger on his formulation of Aristotle's view: 'the practical rationality of the *phronimos* is displayed in what he does even if he does not decide to do that as a result of reasoning' (McDowell 2007, 341). For McDowell, reasoning is the activity of explicitly deciding which affordances to respond to and how to go about respon-

ding to them. He calls this our ‘means-end rationality’ which involves a stepping back’.

Dreyfus doesn’t like the idea of stepping back:

I agree with McDowell that we have a freedom to step back and reflect that non-human animals lack, but I don’t think this is our most pervasive and important kind of freedom. Such stepping back is intermittent in our lives and, in so far as we take up such a «free, distanced orientation», we are no longer able to act in the world. I grant that, when we are absorbed in everyday skillful coping, we have the capacity to step back and reflect but I think it should be obvious that we cannot exercise that capacity without disrupting our coping. (Dreyfus 2007).

Although Dreyfus points to Merleau-Ponty as his inspiration for the notion of a mindless absorbed coping, Merleau-Ponty actually defends the idea of a *minded* coping where the notion of mind is not the traditional disembodied notion, but rather an embodied mind. Mind and reason are not excluded from movement, but redefined as the expression of an embodied intelligence.

I have tried, first of all, to re-establish the roots of mind in its body and in its world, going against doctrines that treat perception as a simple result of the action of external things on our body as well as those which insist on the autonomy of consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 1964).

There are different kinds of mindful self-awareness practices, and not all involve «stepping back». Reflection, or a certain type of self-awareness, in the down-hill skier is not dis-connected from the performance, but part of expertise, part of his skill – a dimension of the flow rather than something different from it – a practice in continuity with embodied coping. It seems reasonable to think that the expert skier should know when to reflect and when not to; and what to reflect about – this just is the model of *phronesis*. In a different context, I referred to this as an embedded or situated reflection.

## 2. THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERFORMANCE

I think we can find good phenomenological evidence for this kind of *phronesis* in practice. In contrast to Dreyfus who *over-emphasizes* the

lack of reflection and thought in expert performance, we can find studies of expert performance that suggest a mindful practice.

John Sutton *et al.* (2011) study athletic performance and develop a model they call «applying intelligence to the reflexes» (AIR). On this view, expert performance is not without some sort of self-awareness. For example, a cricket player, with less than half a second to execute hitting a hard fast traveling at 140 km/h, draws not only on smoothly-practiced batting, but also on context and conditions relevant to the game, in order to hit a shot with extraordinary precision through a slim gap in the field.

It's fast enough to be a reflex, yet it is perfectly context-sensitive. This kind of context-sensitivity, we suggest, requires some forms of mindedness – [an] interpenetration of thought and action exemplified in open skills... Expert performers precisely counteract automaticity, because it limits their ability to make specific adjustments on the fly... Just because skillful action is usually pre-reflective, it does not have to be mindless (Sutton *et al.* 2011).

Sutton contends that the expert cricket player is aware of the specifics of the situation and is capable of on-the-fly, considered awareness which allows for strategic decision making in the flow of performance. This is elective «target control for some features, such as goal, one or more parameters of execution, like timing, force, a variation in the sequence, and so on» (Christensen *et al.* 2016, 50). Accordingly, the expert player is not on automatic pilot – she has trained up her body-schematic control of movement, but what she needs to do in the context of a game is not automatic. On the Dreyfus model, finely tuned motor control processes (an attuned body schema) is all the expert needs. Skill within a context of a game involves more – some mindful strategic sense of where she is going to put the ball.

In studies of dance performance, the philosopher Barbara Montero, drawing on her own experience as a professional ballet-dancer, rejects the idea that expert performance somehow is effortless or thoughtless. She argues that although certain types of bodily awareness may interfere with well-developed skills, it is typically not detrimental to the skills of expert athletes or performing artists. Montero (2010; 2015) examines a number of scientific studies that purport to show that paying attention to certain bodily aspects of performance will interfere with performance. She contends that these studies are

not ecological – that is, they introduce types of cognitive efforts that are simply not found in usual practice – e.g., the instruction to pay constant attention to your feet as you dribble a soccer ball (e.g., Ford *et al.* 2005). Montero also cites qualitative studies that indicate that certain types of conscious monitoring (different in different performances) improve performance.

The idea of a *performative self-awareness* seems to fit Montero's description. The way we are self-aware during expert performance involves a pre-reflective pragmatic self-awareness that does not take the body as an intentional object; it rather involves a «performative awareness [...] that provides a sense that one is moving or doing something, not in terms that are explicitly about body parts, but in terms closer to the goal of the action» (Gallagher 2005a, 73). Dorothée Legrand (2007) follows up on this and distinguishes performative self-awareness from opaque and transparent awareness. By opaque she means a thematic, reflective awareness that objectifies the body – something that would characterize a novice performance when someone is learning to move in dance or music. By transparent she means that the body is experienced nonthematically, prereflectively and as an aspect of the acting subject – as in everyday walking. Legrand describes performative self-awareness as follows: «While dancing [a dancer] is intensively attending to [his body]. But he is not attending to it reflectively as an object. Rather, his [pre-reflective] awareness of his body as subject is heightened».

In the case of expert musical performance, we also find a variety of reflective and pre-reflective attitudes. Simon Høffding conducted a phenomenological study with the Danish String Quartet, using interviews that focused on the precise experiences the musicians have while playing their best. Each member of the quartet had different experiences while playing, but all of them reported that they could be thinking of or experiencing different things –

[...] expert musicians can undergo a wide range of different experiences while playing, from thinking about where to go for beers after the performance, to worrying whether one's facial expression looks interesting to the audience, to enjoying the fact that the playing seems to be unfolding smoothly, and finally to a deep absorption in which one experiences a profound transformation of consciousness (Høffding 2015).

Høffding identifies four different states of awareness in expert performance: (1) *Absent-minded playing* (automatic performance); (2)

*Playing under stress* (e.g., striving to get back to top performance after an interruption – «just barely keeping up without missing the notes, yet coping nevertheless, managing to perform without mistakes»); (3) deep absorption as a kind of *blackout* where there is a complete lack of self-awareness; and (4) deep absorption as a *heightened awareness* of self and surroundings. In cases of deep absorption, Høffding's musicians suggest they experience modulations in the sense of agency: a diminished sense of agency in blackout; an increased sense of agency in heightened awareness. More precisely, in both states of absorption there is a certain *letting go* that involves *passivity*. Even with an increased sense of control in heightened awareness, the performer doesn't intervene in the process, but lets it happen.

### 3. HOW IT HAPPENS

To explain some of these different passivity states, Høffding points to four factors that account for the performance being carried along without heavy reflective intervention: body schema; affect; the music itself; and the other players. The *body schema* is attuned by practice (Gallagher 2005b) – «playing from the body schema», as one of the musicians phrases it, allows you to forget about many details but this gives you a freedom to focus on selective target control. «You let the body function on its own... You're surprised about how much the fingers remember themselves. Let the fingers play... Let go and think about something else». But alone this body-schematic attunement is not sufficient for expert performance.

If musical passivity could be reduced to the functioning of a body schema, it would follow that absorbed musicianship shouldn't be phenomenologically different from absorption in other arts or in sports. With [...] the emotions, however, *prima facie*, we have reason to differentiate the phenomenology of artistic absorption from athletic absorption (Høffding 2015).

As I understand this claim, Høffding is not claiming that athletic performance lacks emotion, or that athletic performance lacks «the game itself», or intersubjectivity, but rather that emotion and the other factors work differently in musical performance.

This motivates the idea that, at least in part, the important differences between musical and athletic performance may have to do with



the way that these *affective factors* are integrated with each other. With respect to emotion, for example, we may want to distinguish expressive movement (aspects of emotion can work like gesture and language and go beyond simple motor control) from instrumental action (primarily under body-schematic control) (see Cole, Gallagher, McNeill 2002; Gallagher, Cole, McNeill 2001). Affect/emotion in relation to music goes in two directions: first, music allows us to explore or develop or regulate emotion in a new way; and second, we «offload» some of the power of emotion in the playing of music (Krueger 2014). If emotion in some cases drives expressive movement during music performance, we shouldn't think that it does so independently of the body schema. That is, it's not that the body schema carries on independently, delivering technically proficient movement, to which we then add an expressive style motivated by specific emotions that may be occasion-relative. One could also think that emotion may have its effect directly on body-schematic processes – slowing down or speeding up such processes, for example, or leading to the adoption of certain initial postures that may influence the performance.

The music itself enters into the regulation of performance. In playing the music, we incorporate tools and instruments into our body schema (e.g. Maravita, Iriki 2004). On the one hand, therefore, we may think that body schematic processes add to the music itself as it is generated in the musical instruments. On the other hand, it goes deeper than this: music moves us; it is something that engages the body schema through its links to rhythm, material resonance, muscle, movement, and action. We get caught up in the music itself.

The sounds of music enter the body and are sensed, felt, and experienced inside the body in a way that, on the whole, the media of other artistic and cultural forms are not. And if one accepts the notion of affordance, then it is not a big step to realizing that there is an element of direct material leverage in the manner in which the sounds of music serve to construct and position individuals in their embodied, everyday lives (Shepherd 2002).

Finally, Høffding considers the other players. This brings us back to the social dimension that is missing in Dreyfus's account. In the context of making music together, Høffding takes music and intersubjectivity to be related. One way to explicate this relation is through recent research that shows while working (or playing) together (in joint action) we form 'joint body schemas' (Soliman, Glenberg 2014), and that one's

peripersonal space extends to include, not just instruments, but other people we are playing with. Moreover, our bodyschematic processes may be involved in what Trevarthen calls intersubjective musicality. He suggests that musicality is involved in our very first way of communicating.

Music moves us because we hear human intentions, thoughts and feelings moving in it, and because we appreciate their urgency and harmony. It excites motives and thoughts that animate our conscious acting [...] It appeals to emotions [...] Evidently a feeling for music is part of the adaptations of the human species for acting in a human-made world; part, too, of how cultural symbols and languages are fabricated and learned (Trevarthen, Delafield-Butt, Schögler 2011, 12).

I won't go into any further details of this analysis (see Salice *et al.* 2016, for more details). The point I want to make is that from these various studies of athletic, dance and musical performance we can catalog a set of variations of deeply embodied and intersubjectively modulated forms of mindfulness in expert performance, rather than the kind of mindlessness described by Dreyfus. In some cases we can describe an embedded/situated reflection (down-hill skier), or a selective target control (Sutton's cricket player), an implicit sense of rightly configured body, and even a conscious monitoring (in the dancer) – a performative self-awareness that is goal-related but nonetheless a pre-reflective sense of body-as-subject (Legrand); or a heightened awareness in deep absorption (Høffding). These are not high-minded cognitivist interventions; they are grounded in deeply embodied, affective, situated, and intersubjectively attuned states that range from deep absorption to an enhanced pre-reflective self-awareness.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

These studies of performance suggest that we need to rethink the notion of mindful behavior in order to get past the notion of mere behavior. Let me conclude, then, by returning to the roots of the enactivist approach in order to situate it somewhere between the idea of a mere mindless behavior that is in no way cognitive (reflecting both the critical accusations of Shapiro, Herstein, and Aizawa, with which we started, and seemingly the position of Dreyfus) and high-minded rationalist conceptions of the mind, that may in fact be on the other side of

the line that McDowell draws. The roots of enactivism can be traced to phenomenology, especially Merleau-Ponty, and to pragmatism, well represented by John Dewey.

What we have been describing, as various forms of mindful behavior, includes

[...] a directed activity that is neither blind mechanism nor intellectual behavior, and which is not accounted for by classic mechanistic accounts or intellectualism [...] Behavior, inasmuch as it has a structure, is not situated in either of these two orders (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 45).

In this regard, Merleau-Ponty offers a critique of what Susan Hurley (1998) later called the «sandwich model» of cognition.

Instead of interpreting the character of sensation, idea and action from their place and function in the sensory-motor circuit, we still incline to interpret the latter from our preconceived and pre-formulated ideas of rigid distinctions between sensations, thoughts and acts. The sensory stimulus is one thing, the central activity, standing for the idea [is another], and the motor discharge, standing for the act proper, is a third... (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 13).

What Merleau-Ponty and the enactivists want to say about this conception perhaps had already been best said by Dewey.

What is wanted is that sensory stimulus, central connections and motor responses shall be viewed, not as separate and complete entities in themselves, but as divisions of labor, functional factors, within the single concrete whole, now designated the reflex arc [...] Upon analysis, we find that we begin not with a sensory stimulus, but with a sensori-motor coordination (Dewey 1896).

What I think the analyses of various forms of performance show is that, beginning with performance, with a minded rather than a mindless behavior, we can start to reconceive what we mean by the embodied mind.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Similar critiques of Dreyfus have been made by Harry Collins (2004), Iris Young (1998) and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2000). They suggest that social and cultural contexts play no part in Dreyfus's account of expertise.

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