

THE PHILOSOPHY AND PHENOMENOLOGY  
OF EVERYDAY EXPERTISE (WORKSHOP REPORT)  
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I. The Plan and Structure of the Workshop

Two of the major philosophers of our time, Hubert Dreyfus and John McDowell, over the past year and a half, had already clashed publicly over questions regarding the nature of the sort of practical intelligence exercised in everyday habitual skills. Their debate has been centred especially on the degree to which conceptual understanding enters into the forms of perception and action required to execute such skills. A number of other leading philosophers were drawn into their debate. The three-day workshop at Wiko brought together some of the leading players in this ongoing debate, along with several of the leading German philosophers currently working on these or related topics, to discuss and explore points of disagreement and to test the strength of some of the supposed points of agreement.

The debate between Dreyfus and McDowell had both a systematic and an exegetical side; and the workshop sought simultaneously to thematize both. On the systematic side, the debate centred on the old Kantian chestnut concerning *the relation between sensibility and understanding in perception* and its Hegelian counterpart concerning *the relation between theoretical and practical understanding in embodied practical agency*. Dreyfus had defended – and in the workshop continued to defend – the position that practical coping, at the most fundamental level, is an essentially non-conceptual affair and that such a primordial non-conceptual lower-level of practical cognition is a necessary precondition of higher-level conceptual and theoretical cognitive processing. He accused those who fail to take this point of falling into the *Myth of the Mental* – the myth of the self-sufficiency of the conceptual upper floors of the edifice of knowledge. Those who fall prey to this myth,

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according to Dreyfus, accordingly ignore the fundamental role in cognition played by the embodied coping that forms the ground floor of our cognitive activity. Formulated in this way, it was natural to take McDowell to be a central target of this critique, because McDowell has famously urged in print a claim to the effect that conceptual rationality is everywhere in our lives – a claim that McDowell represents as essential to a proper understanding of what Kant and Hegel still have to teach contemporary philosophers. In previous writings, Sean Kelly and Charles Taylor had given voice to worries about McDowell's work quite similar to Dreyfus's. One subsidiary purpose of the workshop therefore was to test the strength of these criticisms of McDowell's position. McDowell and a number of the other participants – notably Boyle, Kern and Rödl – were inclined to defend the view that philosophers such as Dreyfus, Kelly and Taylor fall prey to the *Myth of the Disembodied Intellect*: a form of thought that makes it look as if affirming the pervasiveness of conceptual rationality will not cohere with giving proper weight to the bodily character of our lives. McDowell, in the workshop, continued to contend that this myth unwittingly figures in Dreyfus's argument, in the shape of the idea that conceptual rationality is detached from bodily life, characterizable in abstraction from the specifics of the situations in which embodied coping is called for. The workshop therefore initially took the somewhat extraordinary form of an exercise in which philosophers mutually accused each other of unwittingly falling into versions of the very philosophical mistakes that they themselves officially most deplore.

A subsidiary concern of the work lay in the proper phenomenological description of the *lived experience of practical absorption* in skilful coping activity. Central to this dimension of the workshop was the ongoing debate between Sean Kelly and Alva Noë, regarding the relation between perception and action, currently on the cutting edge of the borderline between philosophy and the experimental psychology of human perception. One fulcrum of the dispute was the extent to which the questions here at issue were properly to be understood as empirical questions, admitting of adjudication through experimental findings.

Finally, the workshop was also concerned with interpretative questions. Exegetically, the six primary contested figures were Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein. Differences in philosophical view in this dispute tend to closely parallel differences in the understandings of these figures and the ways they figure as the heroes or the villains in the respective philosophical stories told by each of the central protagonists in the debate. Robert Pippin and Pirmin Stekeler had both done important work on

several of these figures in this connection and helped to keep these interpretative questions at the forefront of the workshop.

The workshop that ensued turned out to be a cooperation between especially the following four institutional partners: Wiko and the philosophy departments of the universities of Leipzig, Basel and Chicago. The funding for the workshop came from three sources: Wiko, the Humboldt Stiftung and a Swiss Government Research grant. The funding from the Humboldt was through a TransCoop grant jointly held by Pirmin Stekeler and myself. The Swiss funds came through a grant held by Sebastian Rödl. The three of us were the primary conveners and organizers of the workshop. In addition to the twenty officially invited symposiasts whose names appear on the program, the workshop was attended throughout by an extremely committed additional core group of about thirty graduate students and post-docs from Basel and Leipzig, along with a few participants who came especially to Berlin for the workshop from other countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Denmark, Italy, Norway, Poland and the United States. Some of these additional participants made decisive contributions to the discussion. At the very beginning of the first day, there were also an additional thirty or so intellectual tourists, most of whom tired of the rigors of philosophical dialectic well before the first day was over and were not to be seen thereafter on either of the additional days!

The format of the workshop was the following: the papers by the nine primary participants were distributed in advance, so that the workshop sessions could be devoted entirely to a discussion of each of the papers, with the author of each paper responding to questions and objections. Beyond the nine presenters, a further set of nine scholars were invited and given an equal role in the workshop discussions; two of these were Wiko Fellows in the current Jahrgang (Michel Chaouli and Christoph König) and one in the upcoming one (Dieter Thomä).

This report should be accompanied by a brochure that provides an outline of the workshop and specifies the names of all of the participants. The only thing the brochure probably does not give any feeling for is how much lively, intensive and crucial discussion also took place outside the official workshop sessions – especially during the meals and coffee breaks. The excellent arrangements made by the Wiko staff were essential to this aspect of the workshop's success.

## II. The Workshop

The discussion format of the workshop was strictly adhered to throughout. The initial presenters had ten minutes to say something about their paper before the floor was opened to discussion. The primary invited symposiasts were given the right to respond first, but time was always allowed for general discussion at the end of each session. The principle was always adhered to that everyone had carefully read the papers under discussion. Such a familiarity was simply assumed at all times. This is one reason why the workshop was able to make so much progress, but also why it was inevitably so frustrating for intellectual tourists.

The workshop was divided over three days. The first day, featuring Dreyfus, McDowell and Kelly as presenters, focused on the terms of the initial debate between Dreyfus and McDowell, with Kelly helping to develop its implications for those who wished to elaborate some version of Dreyfus's position. It became clear that the parties to the debate were not as far apart as they originally thought they were with respect to a number of fundamental points. However, three points – not previously thematized in the published debate– emerged on the first day as significant underlying sources of the conflict: (1) the concept of the human and its supposed differentiating feature *reason* (and thus how to conceive the difference between humans and mere animals), (2) the nature of specifically *practical* reason (and especially whether paradigmatically human forms of action presuppose some form of explicit previous or accompanying linguistically articulated representation), and (3) the concept of *the self* (and to what extent self-consciousness should be conceived as a phenomenal aspect of experience or rather as a logical condition of absorbed agency). The parties to the debate realigned themselves in different ways with respect to these different flash points. With respect to the first point, for example, it emerged that Noë was the only participant who resisted any form of fundamental categorical distinction between humans and mere animals and that Taylor was not prepared to go along with Dreyfus and Kelly's contention that the capacity for absorbed coping should itself be taken to be *the* crucial differentiating feature.

One thing that became clear already on the first day and continued to become clearer over the course of the entire workshop is the extraordinary subtlety and complexity, as well as scope and power, of John McDowell's philosophical views on these questions. Repeated attempts were made to criticize McDowell's basic position. Not only was he able to parry all criticisms, but by the end of the workshop he would also end up converting a

number of his most distinguished critics. It was not the intention of the workshop to have such an unbalanced effect on the outcome of the controversy. Usually, in philosophy at least, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. In this case, however, if the workshop can claim to have contributed towards uncovering the truth, then it seems to have lain mostly on one side.

The second day was largely devoted to gauging the broader philosophical implications of the dispute, by locating it within certain traditional attempts at conceiving the human as rational and at the same time animal. The first section, discussing the work of Andrea Kern, focused on these issues as they arise within the context of practical agency. A central assumption of Dreyfus's and Kelly's came under considerable pressure at this point in the discussion: namely, that to the extent to which an exercise of a practical capacity involves a high degree of absorbed coping it excludes the involvement of rational capacities. A central fruit of this part of the workshop was a considerable clarification of the concept of a skill. The last two sessions of the day, discussing the work of Matt Boyle and Sebastian Rödl, were concerned with how in general to conceive the unity of powers that characterize a particular form of life, such as, in the one case, the power of reason with that of self-movement, and in the other, metabolic self-maintenance with awareness. An interesting point that emerged here in the discussion is that the structure of Dreyfus's and Kelly's views shared much with the traditional forms of the Cartesian view that they themselves sought to avoid. It was a point of contention to what extent this fact should worry them.

During much of the third day, the exegetical aspects of the dispute came to the fore, most especially with respect to the interpretation of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger and Wittgenstein. The discussion here was particularly lively and continued throughout the evening. The interpretative angle turned out to be very fruitful for exploring some of the more subtle substantive philosophical differences among the participants. The morning session, revolving around Robert Pippin's work, centred on the question how to understand Kant's concept of intuition, about which surprisingly deep differences suddenly emerged among the participants. During the second session, discussing the contribution of Alva Noë, equally deep differences emerged about how to draw the moral of Wittgenstein's reflections on rule-following. Interestingly, throughout, Heidegger's related writings on each of these issues emerged as useful points of reference. Afterwards, a number of the participants (especially Charles Taylor and Robert Pippin) suggested that there should be a follow-up workshop – perhaps on Heidegger's writings on Kant – focusing

the issues from just this angle. Through the discussions of these canonical texts over the course of the third day, it became apparent that the position of Dreyfus and Kelly required substantial reformulation. The final session, which had originally been envisioned as devoted to summarizing the findings of the workshop, was dominated by the attempt on the part of Dreyfus and Kelly to meet the challenge of reformulating their position in a manner that left it less vulnerable to the problems that had arisen during the workshop. This reformulated version of their position, however, came under considerable fire, making for a very lively and heated final session!

### III. Consequences of the Workshop

Two conferences have already been planned to continue discussions that emerged directly from this workshop. The first continues a theme of the third day, and will take place at the University of Chicago on April 30, May 1 and May 2, 2010 and will be devoted to the topic of *Kant's Conception of Intuition*. A second conference will take up one of the themes of the second day, and will take place at the University of Leipzig on July 1 and 2, 2010 and will be devoted to *The Concept of Life*, with special reference to the treatment of this topic in Aristotle and Hegel. In addition to these events, Dieter Thomä is organizing a workshop, involving some of the same participants, to take place at Wiko next spring, which will be devoted to the exploration of some of the issues that arose in the workshop in connection with aesthetics. Originally such a connection was envisioned as a possible topic of this year's workshop; however, when it emerged that the art historian, Michael Fried, would be unable to participate, the focus shifted away from this aspect of the debate. Thomä plans to invite Fried for next year's workshop, thus allowing this lost thread of the discussion to be taken up after all!

### IV. A Final Thanks

Two people played an absolutely decisive role in the success of the workshop and should be singled out for special thanks: Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus and Petria Saleh.

Reinhart was a source of endless good advice about everything from questions of practical logistics to ones of intellectual substance. He also attended the entire workshop and participated in many of the mealtime discussions. During the latter his own voice was oc-

asionally heard. He thus proved himself to be not only a valued unofficial co-organizer, but also a feisty philosophical interlocutor.

*Every* invited participant to the workshop raved to me about Petria. She did a remarkable job of helping to plan every aspect of the event and then making sure that those plans were implemented to perfection. I think one of the participants put it best when he said to me: “She is an angel.”