THOUGHT IN ACTION

A distinction can be drawn between our actions – the things we do – and those things that merely happen to us. The traditional view holds that actions are essentially brought about and guided by the agent's intentions. They can be distinguished from happenings on this basis. Intentions are mental states that bring about and guide action by representing its performance.[1] There are two versions of the traditional model. The Simple View holds that every action is brought about by an intention that represents the performance of that very action – thus an act of □-ing is brought about by the intention, 'I intend to □'. The Single Phenomenon View, in contrast, allows that an act of □-ing may also be brought about by an intention(s) that represents the performance of a different, but relevant action(s), such as the components of □-ing.[2] Both versions of the traditional account hold that intentions must bring about movement in a non-deviant way for it count as action.

The traditional model still dominates the philosophy of action, but there is increasing dissatisfaction with it. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that intentions

[1] On this conception, intentions are independent from the bodily movements they cause, and the very same bodily movement can be either an action or a happening depending on whether or not it is caused in the appropriate way by an intention. An alternative conception holds that there are no agency-neutral bodily movements. Certain bodily movements are intrinsically actions. Theorists who take this view often conceive of intentions, not as independent causes of action, but as inseparable components of those bodily movements that count as actions. See, e.g., O'Shaughnessy (1980). Space prevents me from discussing this possibility here.

[2] Bratman (1984) introduces this distinction.

play *some* role in at least some actions, the claim that they are *essential* in every case is problematic. There are many cases of action that cannot be accommodated by this model – see, e.g., the cases discussed by Dreyfus (1991, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2005a), Pollard (2006), and Romdenh-Romluc (in press). Empirical evidence concerning the way our brains function also gives us reason to doubt that intentions play the kind of role in action envisaged by the traditional account – see, e.g., Romdenh-Romluc (2011), Jacobson (unpublished manuscript). For these, and other reasons, an increasing number of theorists are turning to the work of Merleau-Ponty, who offers us an alternative account of action. On his view, mental states, such as intentions, are not necessary for action. Instead, the agent's bodily skills play an essential and central role in agency.

An important figure in the recent debate is Hubert Dreyfus. In a series of papers, he provides an elegant elucidation and defence of Merleau-Ponty's view that brought it to the attention of theorists working in a number of different disciplines, and which opened up new ways to understand agency.[3] However, as many writers – e.g., Romdenh-Romluc (2007), Berendzen (2010), and Mooney (unpublished manuscript) – have pointed out, there is a central problem with Dreyfus's account: he places too little importance on the role of thought in human action. His account is thus problematic – both as a reading of Merleau-Ponty (whose view at least provides the resources for understanding thought's role in agency) and as a model of action in its own

[3] See, e.g., Dreyfus (1991, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2005a, 2005b, 2007).

right. Those who want to endorse the Merleau-Pontyian account as an alternative to the traditional model of action must find some way of remedying this lack. The present paper takes up the challenge and offers a proposal for understanding the role of thought in action.

Merleau-Ponty, bodily skills, and action

In this section, I will present those features of Merleau-Ponty's model that Dreyfus elucidates. I take there to be broad agreement that his reading accurately captures these aspects of Merleau-Ponty's view. It also lays the groundwork for an alternative to the traditional model of agency.

Merleau-Ponty's view of action is inextricably linked with a theory of perception that is inspired by Gestalt psychology. Its fundamental claim is that the perceiver is presented with the world in terms of its value for her behaviour. Rather than simply seeing, e.g., a chair in front of her as an object with a particular shape, size, colour, and spatial location, the perceiver sees it as within reach and as offering an opportunity to sit down. These are not judgements the perceiver makes about the chair on the basis of her perceptual experience; she immediately perceives it in these terms. Dreyfus (2005a) draws our attention to an important distinction that we should bear in mind here. The distinction is between Gibson's (1977) term 'affordances', and the Merleau-Pontyian notion of a 'solicitation'.[4] There is dispute over the exact nature of affordances, but for Gibson, at least, an affordance is a

possibility for action offered by an environment of a certain sort to a particular kind of creature. The possibilities for action that an environment affords a creature depends on the physical structure of that creature, its motor capacities, the nature of the environment, and how the creature is situated with respect to that environment. A gap in a fence affords escape to a mouse chased by a cat – but not a cat chased by a dog – due to the size and shape of the gap, the size and shape of the mouse, and its ability to leap through the gap. The gap affords escape by running in *this* direction – but not *that* one – due to the relative locations of the mouse and the gap. Affordances are subject-relative insofar as they are indexed to the physical structure and capacities of particular creatures, but they are also real features of the world. There is a fact of the matter about whether or not the gap in my fence affords escape to a pursued mouse. Furthermore, an environment will afford certain actions to a particular creature, independently of whether she actually perceives those affordances. The notion of a solicitation differs in that it is a perceptual notion, which concerns how affordances are experienced. Merleau-Ponty argues that a creature perceives her environment as drawing her to perform certain actions. These felt 'pulls' are solicitations. Merleau-Ponty holds that the solicitations differ in their 'urgency', i.e., the strength with which they draw the agent to act. The urgency with which the agent is solicited will depend on what might roughly be called the salience of the affordance for the agent. She will experience

[4] See Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964).

those affordances that are most salient for her as soliciting her most strongly. Less salient affordances will solicit her more weakly. She may not be solicited at all by those affordances that lack salience for her altogether.

Merleau-Ponty holds that the agent's behaviour can be immediately drawn forth and controlled by the solicitations of her environment. The agent is solicited to act in a certain way, and immediately responds by performing the relevant action. She does not need to form a conceptual representation of the action, such as an intention. Her behaviour will be drawn forth by the most urgent solicitations.[5]

The ability to experience the world as soliciting her and respond accordingly is made possible by the agent's motor skills – what Merleau-Ponty calls 'habits' (1962: 143). One acquires such skills through practice. (We can see here why he calls them 'habits', since one's habits just are those things one does repeatedly.) Practice is the body's becoming familiar with the activity in question. Initially, the movements will feel awkward and alien. One's attempts to perform them will be clumsy and lacking in fluidity. Engaging in the activity will be more difficult. As one practices, the movements start to feel familiar and 'natural'. One is able to perform them more smoothly and with more grace. Performing the movements becomes easier. Initially, e.g., it will feel very odd to sit on a bicycle. The bodily

[5] It might be supposed that the view of actions as brought about and guided by the solicitations of the agent's environment is compatible with the claim that such actions involve an intention-in-action (Searle 1983). Dreyfus (1991, 1999) argues against this possibility. I do not have space to consider this here.

movements required to move the pedals, grip the handlebars, reach the brakes, and so on will feel awkward, and I will only manage to do them with difficulty, if at all. However, as I continue to practice, these things will start to feel familiar. My body will become used to the position required to hold the bars and reach the brakes and pedals. The movements will become easier for me to perform. To acquire a motor skill, the body has to – as Merleau-Ponty puts it – 'catch the movement' (1962: 142). This is vividly illustrated by an experience, which is not uncommon when learning a new skill. First, one tries to □ but fails miserably. The next day, one tries again, not expecting things to be any different. But despite one's expectations, one finds one can □, as if by magic. One's body has suddenly grasped what to do.

The body's familiarity with an activity is not only manifest in the relatively smooth grace with which one can perform the relevant bodily movements. It is also manifest in the perception of appropriate parts of the world as soliciting those movements. To exercise any motor skill, one must be in an appropriate part of the world. To walk my dog, e.g., I must be in an environment that contains my dog, his leash, and space for walking. I cannot exercise my dog-walking skills if I am alone in the park. Furthermore, one must know which particular movements are required to □ effectively (there may be an indeterminate number of movements that will satisfy this requirement). To walk my dog up a hill, I must know which particular bodily movements are required to propel myself up the incline, whilst holding my dog's leash to prevent him from chasing sheep. It follows that being skilled at □-ing essentially involves the ability to both pick out those places where one can □,

and to select the movements required to do so successfully in that particular place. The more skilled one is, the better one will be at selecting more or less appropriate places to □, and the movements that make for successful □-ing. Merleau-Ponty holds that these capacities are manifest in perception. One experiences appropriate parts of the world as soliciting one to perform particular movements that together constitute an instance of □-ing. Thus I see the hill as soliciting me to perform the movements required to propel myself up it and control my dog. Once I possess a skill, I can perceive what to do, and respond to these solicitations by acting, without the need to conceptually represent the performance of the action.[6]

Dreyfus, expertise and thought in action

Theorists are broadly in agreement over the components of the account presented so far. But it is incomplete as it stands. It needs to be developed to encompass the role of thought in action. In this section, I explain how Dreyfus develops this account.

Dreyfus takes certain instances of expertise in sport as his paradigm cases. Whilst not many of us are sporting experts, we are all experts at some

[6] Merleau-Ponty allows that in certain unusual cases, the perceptual and the motor components of a skill can come apart, so that an agent may perceive opportunities to perform actions that she cannot perform. He analyses phantom limb cases in this way – the phantom limb comes about because one experiences the world as soliciting one to perform actions with a limb that one does not possess. In this case, the agent possesses a defective motor skill (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 81—82).

set of everyday motor skills required in the course of living, such as opening doors, scratching itches, writing letters, driving cars, riding bicycles, making tea, and so forth (Dreyfus 2007). Dreyfus tends to assume that the exercise of *all* motor skills can be assimilated to the particular instances of sporting expertise that he takes as paradigmatic. The examples he has in mind are those that are sometimes described as 'acting in the flow'. The agent is completely focused on what she is doing. Her actions flow smoothly, and she is playing extremely well – to the best of her ability. Importantly, if the agent begins to *think* about what she is doing, the 'flow' is disrupted. There are many examples of this phenomenon. Cricketer Ken Barrington describes his experience of playing cricket like this, 'When you're playing well you don't think about *anything* and run-making comes naturally. When you're out of form you're conscious of needing to do things right, so you have to think first and act second. To make runs under those conditions is mighty difficult' (Barrington 1968: 97f). Dreyfus calls acting in flow, 'absorbed coping'. He uses Merleau-Ponty's account to explain how action is achieved in these cases. He takes the fact that thought disrupts flow to show that these actions cannot be satisfactorily understood as bodily movements that are brought about by conceptual representations of action, such as intentions. Instead, the player's skill consists in the capacity to perceive what to do – which takes the form of solicitations – and respond to those solicitations by acting. Dreyfus then uses these cases to conclude that being an expert at anything – and, remember, we are all experts at the skills we use in living our daily lives – involves being able to act smoothly, successfully, and without thinking about

what one is doing. In all cases, thought – where this is understood as conceptual representation – gets in the way of an optimal execution of the action.

Dreyfus does not deny that thought plays *some* role in an agent's behaviour. His understanding of its role in action is based on his assumption that the 'acting-in-flow' cases are paradigmatic. First, he allows that thought is sometimes instrumental in the learning process whereby an agent acquires the expertise to 'act in flow'. Prior to acquiring the skill, the agent cannot perceive the world as soliciting her to exercise it. Her first attempts at gaining the skill cannot, therefore, be brought about by the way she perceives her environment. Instead, the agent's behaviour will be brought about by thought. This is not to say that thought is *always* involved in skill acquisition – we learn some skills by copying other people. Neonates have the capacity to imitate others. But a newborn baby is not yet capable of conceptual thought. It is thus plausible to think that the ability to copy what someone else is doing is a hardwired, perceptual capacity that does not necessarily require the formation of conceptual representations of movement. In (at least some) cases where an agent – such as a very young child – learns a skill by copying someone else, it therefore seems that no thought is involved.[7] Nevertheless, there *are* cases where an agent learns a new skill by thinking about what she is doing. Dreyfus (2002) describes these instances of skill acquisition in the following terms. First, the agent learns a set of explicit rules, stating what she

[7] Copying someone else may *sometimes* require one to think about what one is doing.

should do. She engages in practice by following these rules. The agent conceptually represents what is prescribed by the rule, and these conceptual representations initiate and guide her first attempts. As she continues to practice, the agent comes to perceive appropriate parts of the world as soliciting the movements required by her activity. The perceived solicitations draw forth her actions, so that she needs fewer and fewer conceptual representations to guide her behaviour. Once she has become an expert, she can dispense with the conceptual representations altogether. Her behaviour is entirely controlled by a perceptual 'grasp' of what is required by her situation, which is constituted by the solicited requirements for action she experiences.

The second way in which thought may play a role in action on Dreyfus's account is in cases where the seamless flow of perceptually-driven action breaks down (2000: 300—1). The flow of action can break down for a number of different reasons. In some cases, the world will behave unexpectedly – the door handle may come off in my hand as I attempt to open the door. In other cases, 'the situation is so unusual that no immediate response is called forth. Or several responses are solicited with equal pull' (Dreyfus 2005a: 57). There are, no doubt, many other ways in which action may be, to a greater or lesser degree, thwarted, and the flow of coping disrupted. Dreyfus contends that in at least some cases where the seamless flow of successful action is disrupted, thought must take over. When I find the door handle in my hand, my actions no longer flow smoothly from my perceived surroundings. I must stop and think about how to open the door in

order to progress through it. I may, e.g., see a gap in between the door and the frame, and reason that it is wide enough for me to grasp the door with my fingers and pull it open. These thoughts about how to proceed bring about my next action of pulling the door open in the way described. Once I am through the door, the smooth flow of coping can recommence. Similarly, when I find myself in an unusual situation, or one where I am solicited equally by conflicting affordances, my actions no longer smoothly from my perceptual situation. I must think about what to do.

Finally, Dreyfus allows that thought will play a role in bringing about action in cases where the activity in question involves problem-solving that must take account of future possibilities (Dreyfus and Wakefield 1991: 264—5). An example is activity that results from practical deliberation. In these cases, the agent decides what to do by considering the various options and their future outcomes. Dreyfus and Wakefield point out that these future possibilities cannot feature as perceptible elements of the agent's current situation. Instead, she must represent them in thought. The agent's consideration of the options available to her allows her to come to a decision, and so form an intention, which she then acts upon.[8]

Dreyfus claims that where thought is involved in action, its role is merely to trigger absorbed coping. He writes, 'the brain correlate of an act of volition would put the system into a specific attractor landscape [the

[8] Dreyfus and Wakefield also allow that thought is involved in activity that is very complex. But they offer no indication of the sort of activity that is at stake here. Moreover, this possibility seems to drop out of the picture in Dreyfus's later work.

hypothesised brain correlate of absorbed coping]. After that, the brain correlate of the volition would no longer be causally active, but would, as it were, be thrown away as the dynamics of the attractor landscape took over as the brain correlate of the agent's movements' (Dreyfus 1999: 8). He makes much the same point a little later when he writes, 'Merleau-Ponty would contend that the intention in action is only an occasional cause that merely initiates the absorbed coping that carries out the action' (Dreyfus 1999: 10).

Dreyfus does not explain how thought initiates absorbed coping. However, he could do so by appealing to salience. We saw earlier that the agent experiences those affordances that are most salient as soliciting her most strongly. Those that are less salient solicit her more weakly. Those that are not salient may not solicit her at all. On Merleau-Ponty's account, the agent's behaviour is drawn forth by the most urgent solicitations. No doubt there are a number of different factors that contribute to salience. But one such factor is the agent's current task. What the agent is currently doing makes certain opportunities for action – those that are relevant to her current task – salient for her. These opportunities will then solicit her more urgently, and so play a greater role in drawing forth her behaviour. In many cases, the agent takes on a task by forming an intention to do so. Dreyfus could thus offer the following account of how thought triggers absorbed coping: the agent's formation of an intention changes the salience of the opportunities offered to her by her environment. Once the pattern of salience has been altered by the intention, the agent's perception of her surroundings as soliciting her to act in various ways controls her activity. The intention has no

further role to play in bringing about the agent's behaviour.

Problems for Dreyfus

Dreyfus's account is important and contains some valuable insights. But as an account of human action, his view is inadequate. The basic problem is that by taking the acting-in-flow cases as paradigmatic, he both misrepresents the role that thought plays in human action, and the extent to which human activity involves thought.

Dreyfus's assumption that everyday action should be assimilated to expert acting-in-flow leads him to conceive of thought's role – on those occasions when it is involved in action – as triggering absorbed coping. On this view, there are phases of smooth expert coping, where the agent seamlessly and unthinkingly responds to her perceived environment, punctuated by episodes of thought that initiate further phases of absorbed coping. Crucially, thought and perception do not control action simultaneously.

The first thing to note is that Dreyfus's conception of thought's role as merely initiating absorbed coping means that his account of thought's role in action fails on its own terms. Consider his account of skill acquisition, which is central to his model of agency. According to Dreyfus, the novice begins by conceptually representing rules, which she uses to guide her behaviour. As she progresses, she comes to see the world as soliciting the required actions, and she no longer needs to think about every aspect of her behaviour. Eventually, if all goes well, she becomes an expert and need not think about

her behaviour at all. However, at some point, the agent will be reasonably proficient, but not yet an expert. She is skilled enough to perceive certain opportunities for action, but she must still think about what she is doing to act successfully. In other words, there will be certain requirements for action that she is not yet skilled enough to perceive and must represent in thought. Moreover, these conceptual represented requirements will play an ongoing role in guiding actions. In such a case, her behaviour is *simultaneously* controlled by both thought and perception. Before I can climb, e.g., the fissures and cracks in the rock-face are not presented to me as hand and foot holds. I do not perceive them as affording me passage up the rock-face. My first attempts at climbing are controlled by conceptual representations of what I should do. Through practice, I gradually acquire the perceptual and motor capacities that together comprise the skill. At a certain stage in learning, I can perceive larger fissures as handholds, but my instructor must still tell me which smaller cracks will take my weight. My progress up the rock-face is guided by both the perception of certain cracks as soliciting me to use them as handholds, and the conceptual representation of the smaller fissures in the rock as capable of supporting my body. Since Dreyfus's model does not allow us to make sense of thought playing an ongoing role in guiding action, he cannot accommodate these cases.

The problem is further reinforced once it is recognised that by taking acting-in-flow cases as paradigmatic, Dreyfus misconstrues the phenomenology of human action. Thought plays a far greater role in our behaviour than he allows. His conception of thought as merely initiating

phases of absorbed coping means that he cannot satisfactorily account for much of it. First, Dreyfus is wrong in thinking that *all* skills follow the pattern of acquisition he outlines, where – if all goes well – one progresses from a beginner who must think about what she is doing to an expert who can rely solely on perception to control her behaviour. There are some cases where even the master must routinely think about what she is doing to exercise her skill to the very best of her ability. Furthermore, the role of thought in these cases is not to initiate absorbed coping after the flow is disrupted. Instead, thought plays an ongoing role in guiding action, like it does in the case of the proficient climber. A skilled surgeon, e.g., must think about the surgery she is performing in order to carry it out properly. She will perceive more of what has to be done than the novice. But she can never rely solely on these perceived requirements to perform the surgery in the way implied by Dreyfus's account. Conceptually represented requirements for action must continuously guide her behaviour.[9]

Second, as Dreyfus acknowledges, human beings often engage in practical reasoning. We weigh up our various reasons for action, and come to a decision about what to do, which we then act upon. There would be no point in deliberating if we could not act on the decisions we reached. Whilst it would be false to think that *all* our actions are the result of conscious deliberation, we must recognise that *many* of them are. Dreyfus conceives of the deliberation as initiating an episode of absorbed coping. However, it

[9] Gallagher (2009) also notes in passing, the way that thought can enter into the expert

seems that in many cases, this description is inaccurate, and instead, the practical reasoning is integrated with the flow of action. Consider this example. I got up this morning and wondered whether to drink tea or coffee. I thought about the fact that I really like coffee, but am trying to imbibe less caffeine. I reluctantly decided to have tea, and so I made a cup. I then pottered around the kitchen and tried to decide what to eat for breakfast. I thought about making some porridge, but then realised there was not enough time. I decided to eat cereals instead, and poured some into a bowl. It would surely be wrong to describe this case as small episodes of absorbed coping, punctuated by stretches of practical reasoning that re-start the smooth, unthinking flow. Instead, as Mooney points out, these thoughts – the conceptual representations that play a role in guiding my action in a case like this – should be thought of as part of my flow of behaviour. His example from academic life beautifully illustrates this point:

> As I approach Newman House to hear a paper, I realise that I am daydreaming and dawdling and had better take longer strides, and later on again I decide to run. The conference room has tightly bunched chairs and a creaky floorboard near the door. It is a lot harder to sneak in late and find a free chair without making a commotion. Should accelerating into a run not be enough, I have a contingency plan of how to regain my breath, tiptoe around the floorboard and squat on the ground. It will be as if I were there from the beginning, and free from the disapproving stares of others (unpublished manuscript, pp. 26—27).

---

exercise of motor skills.

Mooney calls the thoughts that feature in the flow of everyday action 'little reflections'. In such cases, the agent's thought plays an ongoing role in controlling her activity, which cannot be properly captured by Dreyfus's conception of thought as triggering episodes of absorbed coping.

Thought and action: a Merleau-Pontyian proposal

A Merleau-Pontyian account of thought's role in action must accommodate it within his basic framework. For him, action has the following structure. The agent 'grasps' the possibilities for action afforded by her surroundings. Her 'understanding' of what she can do in that particular environment initiates and controls her behaviour. The agent's 'grasp' of these possibilities is manifest in perception of her environment as soliciting her in various ways. There is no need for the agent to conceptually represent the action to be performed. Action is made possible by the agent's possession of motor skills. I propose that there are two central ways that thought can enter into this picture.

First, thought can have an ongoing effect on the way the agent perceives her environment. There are different ways that thought can do this. One thing thought does is affect the salience of different action possibilities. We saw above that the agent experiences solicitations as varying in their 'urgency' or attractive power. Certain possibilities for action solicit her more strongly than others, demanding that she take them up. Other possibilities solicit her more weakly, merely suggesting themselves as things she could do.

The agent's actions are drawn forth by the solicitations with the greatest attractive power. The urgency with which an affordance solicits the agent depends on its salience. Thought contributes to the salience of a possibility for action. Different types of thought can make a contribution. We have already seen that an important factor in determining salience is the agent's current task. Those opportunities for action that are relevant to what she is currently doing are salient for her, and will solicit her more strongly. My goal of baking a cake will make those action possibilities that are relevant to this task – such as flour-buying, bowl-cleaning, sugar-weighing, etc. – salient for me, and they will solicit me accordingly. In many cases, the agent takes on a task by intending or deciding to do so. Thus the agent's intentions/decisions affect the way she perceives the world. But intentions are not the only sort of thought that can affect salience. The agent's desires will also make certain possibilities for action more salient, and thus stand out as more attractive than others. My intense desire for lasagne makes the Italian eatery salient as a lasagne-procuring opportunity. I thus experience the restaurant as soliciting me strongly. The saliency of affordances will be affected by the agent's beliefs. My belief that a notorious prisoner has escaped makes dark alleys appear more threatening. I am more inclined to notice them as places that a dangerous convict might hide. The opportunity to avoid them thus becomes more salient for me, and I experience them as soliciting me to give them a wide berth. The way the agent imagines her surroundings can also affect the salience of affordances, and so the strength with which they solicit her. I imagine a werewolf lurking in the woods outside my house. I know there are

no such things as werewolves, so there cannot be one there. Nevertheless, my imaginings affect how I perceive the entrance to the woods – it becomes salient for me as to-be-avoided. In each of these cases, the agent's thoughts affect the way that she perceives her environment – they play a role in determining which affordances are salient for her, and so which solicit her most strongly. Notice, moreover, that it seems implausible to suppose that the thought only plays a momentary role in patterning the salience of affordances. I must, e.g., *continually* imagine the lurking werewolf for the entrance to the woods to stand out as salient for me as to-be-avoided. The persistence of the imagining sustains the salience of this affordance. Since the agent's actions will be drawn forth by the solicitations with the strongest attractive power, this is one way that thought can play an ongoing role in the guidance of action.[10]

The second central way that thought can play an ongoing role in bringing about action is by adding to the agent's grasp of the possibilities afforded by her environment. The agent can conceptually represent more possibilities for action than those she currently perceives. In these cases, the way the agent conceptually represents her environment, together with her

[10] It is also worth noting that thought can affect perception in another way: the agent's conceptual capacities can play a role in shaping her powers of perceptual discrimination, which in turn affects the way she is solicited by her environment. See, e.g., Gumperz and Levinson (1997), Bowerman and Choi (2001), and Roberson et al. (2000). This fact belies Dreyfus's (2005a, 2005b) claim that coping does not involve our conceptual capacities.

perception of it as soliciting certain actions, jointly bring about and control her behaviour. I, e.g., develop diabetes and must avoid sugary food. I go to the buffet table and see a cake. I know I must not eat any, and so I conceptually represent the cake as not-to-be-eaten. At the same time, I experience the fruit salad as soliciting me to eat it. This composite apprehension of my environment, which combines a conceptually represented affordance (avoid cake) and a perceived solicitation (eat fruit salad), brings about my behaviour of fruit salad-eating.

One might wonder at this point, how to make sense of the idea that a conceptually represented possibility for action can bring about behaviour on Merleau-Ponty's account. A key component of his view is that the agent's motor skills make it possible for her to discriminate possibilities for action and to respond accordingly. A Merleau-Pontyian model of thought's role in human behaviour should show how the ability to act in response to a conceptually represented opportunity for action is also made possible by the agent's motor skills. Merleau-Ponty himself offers such an account. It centres on a capacity he calls 'the power to reckon with the possible' (1962: 109). Merleau-Ponty reveals this capacity to us through his discussion of the case of Schneider – a veteran with a rather odd set of disabilities resulting from a brain injury he incurred during World War I. Merleau-Ponty argues that Schneider's disabilities stem from a deficit in his power to reckon with the possible. It will be useful to focus on one particular feature of his case here. Schneider is unable to recognise a house he has visited many times unless he is actually going there. If Schneider simply passes the house on his way

elsewhere, it does not appear familiar to him (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 134—5). Things are, of course, very different for a normal human agent (one with no injury or damage to the brain or nervous system), who *will* recognise a house she has often visited, even when she is going somewhere else.

I have suggested elsewhere that Merleau-Ponty can be read as holding that Schneider's problem results from an inability to access his motor skills in the normal way.[11] Consider what is involved in perceiving something – a place or object – as familiar, on Merleau-Ponty's account. One perceives something as familiar when one has acquired the skill or habit of interacting with it. It is, e.g., by practising, and so gaining the skill of playing the saxophone that the instrument comes to feel familiar in my hands. Initially, its size and weight, and the finger positions needed to play it, feel odd and uncomfortable. Gaining the skill partly involves these things coming to feel natural and familiar. Similarly, the city where I live was once a strange place to me. I did not know how to orient myself in it and find the various shops, cinemas, markets, and so forth. As I spent my days moving around it, I came to know the city. Through my repeated interactions with it, I developed a skill of navigating the city. I came to perceive certain roads as offering passage to particular places, and certain places as affording certain possibilities for my actions, such as buying bread, visiting a friend, walking in the park. The city became familiar to me. To perceive something as familiar is thus to perceive it as requiring (or being appropriate for) certain habitual forms of

[11] See Romdenh-Romluc (2007) for a detailed argument in favour of this interpretation of

interaction. It is to be solicited by that place or thing. To be solicited to perform a certain action is to exercise the same skill used in performing that action. To perceive something as familiar is therefore to exercise one's skills of interacting with it. Schneider has visited the house he does not always recognise many times; he habitually interacts with the house. His habit allows him to recognise the house – its familiar appearance is itself an exercise of this habit. The reason that Schneider cannot always recognise the house is because his skill of interacting with it is not always available to him. He cannot access this skill when he is doing something else. Schneider's case is thus different from that of the normal human agent, who will recognise a house she has visited many times, even if she merely passes it on her way elsewhere. The normal human agent is able to perceive the house as familiar, no matter what she is doing, because her skill of interacting with it is always available to her.

This peculiar feature of Schneider's case illustrates what Merleau-Ponty takes to be a more general fact about him. Schneider can only access a certain subset of his motor skills or habits: those that are relevant to what he is actually doing. To put matters another way, Schneider's current task and actual environment make certain skills available to him, which he can then use in perception and action. The skills made available are those required to carry out those elements of his current task that he can complete in his actual environment. In contrast, the motor skills and habits of the normal

---

Merleau-Ponty.

human agent are constantly available to her. It is this constant availability of the agent's motor skills that Merleau-Ponty calls 'the power to reckon with the possible' (1962: 109).

How does this power enable the agent to act in response to a conceptually represented possibility for action? To understand this, we need to consider Merleau-Ponty's account of perception in a little more detail. For him, perception does not involve passively receiving data from the world. Instead, the agent is active in perception. As we have seen, she does not simply perceive the objective features of her environment, she perceives it in terms of its significance for her actions, and what is salient for her. Merleau-Ponty holds that the agent 'summons' solicitations from the world. In so doing, she 'projects' a situation around herself – one that calls for a certain mode of action (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 136). On this picture, the content of perception is partly determined by the nature of perceived things, but also shaped by the perceiver herself. We can see from this description that the perceptual component of a motor skill is the ability to appropriately invest one's environment with bodily significance. My skill at, e.g., snowboarding comprises the capacity to summon the invitation to snowboard from the snowy mountain slopes. In so doing, I project a snowboarding situation around me – one that calls for snowboarding actions. I do so appropriately insofar as I can actually snowboard in my present environment, and so the solicitations I experience correspond to real possibilities for action that it affords me. Merleau-Ponty holds that the capacity to project a situation around oneself, which is part and parcel of possessing a motor skill, is not

confined to perception. It is also involved in imagination. He writes, 'To say that I imagine Peter is to say that I bring about the pseudo-presence of Peter by putting into operation the "Peter-behaviour-pattern"' (1962: 181). In this passage, Merleau-Ponty suggests that imagining one's friend Peter involves exercising the bodily skills one usually uses to interact with him. These 'Peter-skills' comprise two elements: a perceptual component (I perceive him as lovable, familiar, etc.), and a motor component (I behave in certain friendly ways towards Peter). Imagining Peter involves exercising Peter-skills when he is absent, summoning up the demands he would make on me if he were here. Thus I bring about Peter's 'pseudo-presence'. Merleau-Ponty holds that the same operation is used to invest a conceptual representation with bodily significance, i.e., to imbue it with value for one's actions.[12]

We can gain a better grip on the phenomenon that Merleau-Ponty has in mind here by thinking about the following example. Annette knows that her great-grandfather was a miner. She knows of the long hours he spent deep underground, the cramped conditions in which he worked, the ever-present danger of explosions. One day, however, Annette is out walking when she falls down a pothole. She has to make her way along a narrow tunnel to an opening further down the hill where she can escape into the sunlight. The experience of being trapped below the surface, in cramped, claustrophobic conditions, gives Annette a new insight into her great-grandfather's life. She does not learn any new facts about his existence. But

[12] See, e.g., Merleau-Ponty's remarks on moral situations (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 112).

she now has a different appreciation of what it was like to work down the mine. For Merleau-Ponty, Annette has gained a bodily understanding of her grandfather's life and the demands for action that his situation would have made upon him. The conceptual representation of his existence that constitutes her knowledge of his life has taken on a bodily significance. Annette's bodily grasp of her great-grandfather's situation is an exercise of her motor skills, including those required to move through the pothole to free herself after she is trapped. Investing a conceptual representation with bodily significance involves the body's grasping the action possibilities afforded by the represented state of affairs. Where the subject conceptually represents her own environment, this allows the representation to function like a perceived affordance and solicit action.

It is worth noting that thought's role in action is very different on this model to the role it plays on the traditional account. On the traditional view, intentions are necessary for action, and whilst intentions may be informed by the agent's desires and beliefs, it is only intentions that can directly bring about action. In contrast, the Merleau-Pontyian model allows a much wider range of thoughts to play a direct role in bringing about action, and it is not necessary for the agent to form an intention to act. As we have seen, action can be brought about by intentions, desires, beliefs, imaginings, and so on. Moreover, the thoughts that bring about action on the traditional view represent the action to be performed. However, according to the Merleau-Pontyian account, they may *sometimes* represent the action to be performed, but they need not do so. Instead, there will be cases where the

thoughts that control action represent the agent's environment, like in the example above where I conceptually represent the cake as not-to-be-eaten. The traditional view takes thought to have sole responsibility for producing action. Perception plays a role in guiding actions, but it does so by providing sensory input for thought, which then produces action as its output.[13] On the Merleau-Pontyian account, however, thought never has sole responsibility for producing action. The agent's behaviour is always also controlled by her perceived environment. Thus the Merleau-Pontyian model does not conceive of thought as a 'middleman', standing between perception and action.

My proposed model offers a nice account of the cases that cause problems for Dreyfus's account. The basic difficulty his view faces is that his conception of thought as merely triggering episodes of absorbed coping means that he cannot explain cases where thought plays an ongoing role in action.

I presented four examples. The first is the agent who is learning to climb. Before she has acquired the skill, she cannot perceive the rock-face as soliciting her to climb it. Her initial attempts to climb will be brought about by conceptual representations specifying what she should do. Through practice, the agent gains the perceptual and motor capacities involved in climbing, and is thus able to perceive the fissures and cracks in the rock as places she can grip with her hands, or stand on with her feet. At some point in this process, the agent will be sufficiently skilled to perceive some requirements

[13] Hurley (2001) calls the view that perception functions as input for a system that produces

for action, but she will still need to think about what she is doing. Moreover, the conceptually represented requirements for action will be continuously involved in guiding her actions. On my account, the agent perceives her environment as soliciting her to perform certain actions. She can 'add' further affordances to her perceived environment by conceptually representing action requirements that she does not perceive. These represented affordances then function like solicitations, playing a role in controlling the agent's actions. This is what the agent does when she first learns to climb. She represents a certain fissure in the rock as a handhold. Her representation functions like a solicitation. It is part of the pattern of solicitations – both perceived and represented – that together make up her apprehension of her world. The perceived solicitations, together with the conceptual representation of the fissure as a handhold, draw her to act. As the agent practices, she comes to see appropriate cracks in the rock as handholds, and no longer needs to conceptually represent them as such to climb up the rock-face. It is possible that the expert climber need not think about what she is doing at all – her actions are entirely controlled by perceived solicitations. However, it may be that even the expert climber must think about some aspects of her behaviour to exercise her skill effectively. This is so in the second case examined above – that of the skilled surgeon. She is an expert in her field, but must always think about what she is doing to exercise her skill effectively. In a case like this, the agent must always conceptually represent

---

action as its output, with thought in the middle, 'the classical sandwich model'.

certain requirements for action; she cannot come to perceive everything she must do, no matter how skilled she is. As in the previous case, the represented requirements for action form part of the agent's apprehended environment, together with the perceived solicitations. This composite apprehension of her environment draws forth and guides her behaviour.

The third and fourth cases were examples of what Mooney calls 'little reflections'. These are thoughts about what one is doing, which play a role in one's doing of it, and which should be thought of as part of the flow of behaviour. In the third case, I potter around my kitchen deciding whether to make tea or coffee, decide to make tea, and so make a cup. I then wonder what to eat for breakfast, decide to eat cereals and so pour myself a bowl. In the fourth case, Mooney realises he is late for a lecture at Newman House, and so quickens his pace, before later breaking into a run. Before he arrives, he thinks about the tightly packed chairs and squeaky floorboard, working out how to enter the room with as little noise as possible. His plan controls his actions as he arrives in the room. These cases may involve representing requirements for action that go beyond the way the agent perceives the world. Perhaps Mooney has not avoided the squeaky floorboard in Newman House a sufficient number of times for it to solicit him to avoid it. In this case, his representation of it as squeaky – and so to-be-avoided – adds extra significance for his actions. His action of stepping over it when he enters the room is drawn forth and guided by both perceptual solicitations and the represented requirement that he avoid the rogue floorboard. But it may be that in both cases, the agent's thoughts do not add requirements that go

beyond those perceived. Instead, thought may play a role in controlling action by affecting the salience of the solicitations. My decision to make a cup of tea makes tea-making solicitations more salient for me than coffee-making ones. I will be more strongly solicited to make tea than coffee, and I will thus make a cup of tea. Similarly, Mooney may often avoid the squeaky floorboard, and thus be solicited to avoid it. However, his thought that he really must avoid it so that he makes as little disturbance as possible, makes the solicitation very salient for him, and so it solicits him very strongly. Importantly, it seems that the thought that makes the affordance salient cannot be discarded once it has served its role of highlighting the affordance. Instead, the affordance only remains salient for the agent as long as the thought is in play. If, e.g., Mooney stops thinking about avoiding the squeaky floorboard, he is likely to step on it as he enters the room. The absence of the thought means that avoiding the squeaky floorboard is no longer salient for him, and the floorboard no longer urgently solicits him to avoid it.

Finally, I must explain how the acting-in-flow cases can be accommodated on my account. I have criticised Dreyfus for taking these cases to be paradigmatic of human action. As we have seen, this leads him to a distorted view of the phenomenology of our behaviour. Thought plays a different, and much greater role in our actions than he allows. Nevertheless, it is clear that the acting-in-flow cases are real phenomena that must be accommodated. I must explain why thinking about what one is doing interferes with action in these cases for my proposal to be satisfactory. I can

accommodate these cases in the following way. In certain circumstances, the exercise of certain skills is best controlled by perception. Sporting skills are a typical example.[14] There are a number of reasons why this is so. One factor is the speed at which one must act. A familiar fact from everyday experience is that we can sometimes act more quickly than we can think. I catch the mug that falls out of the cupboard before I have time to form any intention to do so. Likewise, I have already swerved to avoid a squirrel in the road before I have time to remember that this is dangerous and could cause an accident. Thus, for those activities where skilful engagement in them requires the agent to act quickly, there will be insufficient time for the agent to think about what she must do. Instead, action must be accomplished in some other way. On the Merleau-Pontyian account, it will be driven by perception. It is also plausible to suppose that we can perceive more finely-grained action requirements than those we can conceptually represent. I can see exactly how far, and in which direction, I must move my leg to kick the ball. It's not clear that I even possess concepts that would allow me to conceptually

[14] Perception is not always the best way to control one's expert exercise of a sporting skill. Berendzen (2010) rightly draws attention to the phenomenon of coaching, which requires the agent to think about what she is doing. Dreyfus (2007) claims that in such activity, the expert regresses to a prior level of proficiency. I agree with Berendzen (2010) that this is unsatisfactory, since coaching is surely an essential part of skilled sporting activity. The top experts are those who can make use of coaching to hone their skills. They are superior to players who cannot adapt their skills to incorporate new techniques and strategies. Thus it is only certain instances of exercising (some) sporting skills that are best controlled by perception.

represent this fact. Of course, I could use a perceptual-demonstrative, and form a representation with the content, 'I must move my leg like *this* to kick the ball' (where the content of 'this' is determined by my perception of how I must kick the ball). But in this case, the relevant information about the action requirement is specified perceptually. Thus the conceptual representation adds nothing further to the action requirements the agent perceives. It is therefore redundant for the control of action; the perceived solicitation is sufficient. There are, no doubt, further reasons why the exercise of certain skills on certain occasions is best controlled by perception, rather than conceptually represented requirements for action.

The cases of acting-in-flow that Dreyfus cites will be instances where the exercise of the skill is best driven by perception. Thought disrupts the flow of action in the following way. When the agent starts to think about what she is doing, she conceptually represents requirements for action. These will be inferior for the control of action to the requirements she perceives, i.e., the solicitations. But these conceptually represented requirements will form part of a composite apprehension of her environment, which includes the perceptual solicitations. This composite 'grasp' of her surroundings and the possibilities of action they afford will draw forth and guide her behaviour. Since it incorporates the inferior, conceptually represented action requirements, the resulting behaviour will be less successful than if those conceptual representations were absent. This is why thinking about what one is doing in these cases, adversely affects one's doing of it.

Conclusion

Merleau-Ponty offers an alternative to the traditional view of action as essentially brought about by the agent's intentions. Dreyfus has done much important work in elucidating Merleau-Ponty's view and bringing it to the attention of contemporary theorists. However, Dreyfus conceives of thought as merely triggering absorbed coping, which is entirely guided by the agent's perceptions. Consequently, he cannot explain how the agent's thoughts can play an ongoing role in guiding her behaviour. Dreyfus's view should thus be rejected, both as an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty, and as an account of action in its own right. Whilst Merleau-Ponty does not address the issue of thought-driven action in any detail, his account provides the resources to accommodate this form of behaviour. In this paper, I offer a Merleau-Pontyian proposal for explaining the role of thought in bringing about action.

On my proposal, the agent's behaviour is initiated and controlled by her apprehension of her environment. The agent apprehends her surroundings in terms of the action possibilities they afford her. These are ordered in terms of their salience, with the most salient possibilities soliciting her most strongly. The agent's thoughts are one of the factors that affect the salience of the action opportunities available to the agent. The most salient action possibilities – those with the strongest 'attractive power' – are those that draw forth action. The agent's apprehension of her environment comprises both her perceptions and her conceptual representations of it. The agent may conceptually represent her environment as having properties that go beyond those she perceives. It is the agent's motor skills or habits that

make action possible. A motor skill has two interrelated components: a motor aspect (the ability to perform the relevant bodily movements), and a perceptual aspect (the ability to perceive appropriate parts of the world as soliciting those bodily movements). The perceptual component of a motor skill is effectively the power to invest one's surroundings with significance for one's actions. In perception, this involves summoning solicitations from the world. But the same capacity can also be used to imbue conceptual representations with significance for one's behaviour, so that one has a bodily grasp of the action possibilities afforded by the represented state of affairs. This allows the conceptual representation to function like a perceived affordance, drawing forth one's actions.

My proposal explains how thought and perception can combine to simultaneously control action. Indeed, it is doubtful that there are any forms of human action where thought plays *no* role. Even where the agent is not actually thinking about what she is doing, her standing beliefs, desires, intentions and so on will partly determine the strength of the solicitations that draw her to act. It follows that thought plays a far more important role in human behaviour than Dreyfus recognises.

References

Barrington, K. (1968), *Playing it Straight* (London: Stanley Paul).

Berendzen, J. (2010), 'Coping without Foundations: on Dreyfus' Use of Merleau-Ponty', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 18/5: 629-649.

Bowerman, M., and Choi, S. (2001), 'Shaping Meanings for Language: Universal and Language Specific in the Acquisition of Spatial Semantic Categories', in M. Bowerman and S. Levinson (eds.), *Language Acquisition and Conceptual Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 475-511.

Bratman, M. (1984), 'Two Faces of Intention', *The Philosophical Review*, XCII/3: 375-405.

Dreyfus, H. and Wakefield, J. (1991), 'Intentionality and the Phenomenology of Action', in E. Lepore and R. Van Gulick (eds.) *John Searle and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell), 259-270.

Dreyfus, H. (1999), 'The Primacy of Phenomenology Over Logical Analysis: A Critique of Searle', *Philosophical Topics*, 27/2: 3-24.

Dreyfus, H. (2000), 'A Merleau-Pontyian Critique of Husserl's and Searle's Representationalist Accounts of Action', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 100/3: 287—302.

Dreyfus, H. (2002), 'Intelligence Without Representation – Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Mental Representation and the Relevance of Phenomenology to Scientific Explanation', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 1/4: 367-

383.

Dreyfus, H. (2005a), 'Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 79/2: 47-65.

Dreyfus, H. (2005b), 'Response to McDowell', *Inquiry* 50/4: 371-377.

Dreyfus, H. (2007), 'The Return of the Myth of the Mental', *Inquiry*, 50/4: 352-65.

Gallagher, S. (2009), 'Review of *Reading Merleau-Ponty: On* Phenomenology of Perception. Edited by Thomas Baldwin. London and New York: Routledge, 2007', *Mind*, 118/472: 1105-1111.

Gibson, J. J. (1977), 'The Theory of Affordances', in R. Shaw and J. Bransford (eds.), *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum), 67-82.

Gumperz, J. J., Levinson, S. C. (1997), 'Rethinking Linguistic Relativity', *Current Anthropology*, 32: 612-623.

Hurley, S. (2001), 'Perception and Action: Alternative Views', *Synthese* 129/1: 3-40.

Jacobson, A. J. (unpublished manuscript), 'Implicit Bias and Moral Blameworthiness'.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962), translated by C. Smith, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge).

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964) 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', in M. Merleau-Ponty, translated by R. McCleary, *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 39-83.

Mooney, T. (unpublished manuscript), 'Reflection as Work Ongoing: On Developing Human Perception in Merleau-Ponty'.

O'Shaughnessy, B. (1980), *The Will: A Dual Aspect Theory (Two Volumes)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Pollard, B. (2006), 'Explaining Actions with Habits', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 43/1: 57-69.

Roberson, D., Davidoff, J., and Shapiro, L. (2000), 'Colour Categories are Not Universal: Replications and New Evidence from a Stone-Age Culture', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 129: 369-398.

Roberson, D., Davidoff, J., and Shapiro, L. (2002), 'Squaring the Circle: The

Cultural Relativity of Good Shape', *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 2: 29-53.

Romdenh-Romluc, K. (2007), 'Merleau-Ponty and the Power to Reckon with the Possible', in T. Baldwin (ed.) *Reading Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge), 44-58.

Romdenh-Romluc, K. (2011), 'Embodied Cognition and Agency', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* 111/1: 79—95.

Romdenh-Romluc, K. (in press) 'Habits and Attention', in R. Jensen and D. Moran (eds.), *The Phenomenology of Embodied Subjectivity* (Dordrecht: Springer).