Coping and its Contrasts

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Hubert Dreyfus is best known for his influential interpretations of Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Foucault, and for his detailed, phenomenologically based criticisms of artificial intelligence research and cognitivist philosophies of mind. These two projects come together in Dreyfus's phenomenological articulation of embodied, practical coping with one's surroundings as a fundamental mode of intentionality. Dreyfus claims that a philosophical explication should begin with the intentional directedness of such practical skillfulness, as more basic than the forms of directedness familiar from other accounts of intentionality. While he thereby makes common cause with non-naturalistic approaches to explicating intentionality, Dreyfus crucially differentiates his account from the familiar interpretivist, mentalist, and social-normative non-naturalisms.

In this paper, I endorse Dreyfus's claim to the distinctiveness and importance of the intentionality of practical coping. I also argue, however, that Dreyfus's efforts to differentiate coping from other modes of intentionality concedes too much to some of the philosophical programs that he criticizes. Dreyfus introduces the distinctive intentionality of practical coping by contrasting it to explicit, linguistic representation, to theoretical understanding (especially in the natural sciences and mathematics) and to accountability to social norms. For Dreyfus, practical coping can neither be made fully explicit nor can it be adequately explicated theoretically. While he does recognize the social normativity of everyday practical coping, he insists that its social character is dispensable for a philosophical account of intentional comportment. Linguistic representation, theoretical explanation, and social normativity are, he claims, distinct and important modes of intentional comportment, but they must be understood as phenomenologically founded upon practical coping. I propose a reinterpretation of these three contrasts. What Dreyfus's work shows is not an irreducible difference between practical coping and explicit articulation, theoretical understanding, or social normativity, but rather the inadequacy of the received accounts of language, theory, and social norms which make possible the contrasts that set the stage for his account of coping. These contrasts were undoubtedly rhetorically important in introducing the distinctive features of Dreyfus's account, but they should be surpassed in order to appreciate fully its philosophical significance.

I--Coping with Intentionality

In this section, I shall explicate Dreyfus's account of the intentionality of practical coping without foregrounding his insistence upon its tacit, atheoretical, and asocial character. The contrasts to explicit interpretation, theoretical understanding, and social normativity then stand out as subsequent, debatable claims about the scope of practical intentionality rather than as constitutive contrasts that express its distinctive character as an intentional directedness.

By "practical coping," Dreyfus means to indicate the mostly smooth and unobtrusive responsiveness to circumstances that enables human beings to get around in the world. Its scope extends from mundane activities like using utensils to eat, walking across uneven terrain, or sitting and working at a desk, to the extraordinary mastery exhibited in competitive athletic performances or grandmaster chess. Tools figure prominently in these coping activities. Often we competently deal with a wide range of equipment as the background to more thematic

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1 This paper is in honor of Hubert Dreyfus, and in memory of my graduate teacher, Samuel Todes. I have benefitted from comments by Hubert Dreyfus, Charles Guignon, and Theodore Schatzki on an earlier version.
performances: while holding a conversation, we unobtrusively adjust ourselves to a chair, the lighting, or the movements of others in the room; in writing a letter, we deftly wield the pen, hold the paper, lean on the desk, take a sip of coffee, and so forth.

The intentionality of practical coping is a directedness of bodies rather than minds. Dreyfus emphasizes bodily coordination and orientation toward the task at hand, as one hammers a nail, sits in a chair, drives to the grocery, or exchanges pleasantries at a party. Here a body is not an object with fixed boundaries, but the practical unification of coordinated activity. Mastery of a tool allows its incorporation within the field of one's bodily comportment; the difference between smooth competence and clumsy ineptness reflects the degree of bodily assimilation of the tool. Merleau-Ponty's example of a blind person's cane, or a myopic's eyeglasses, display relatively permanent extensions of the bodily field, but pens, chopsticks, automobiles, or wheelchairs (not to mention clothes) can be temporarily assimilated onto the near side of one's practical comportment toward the world. Bodies, one might say, are geared toward the world.

Such practical comportment is directed toward an actual situation. Three points are figured in this formulation. First, practical intentional comportment is not mediated by mental representations, a sensory manifold, tacit rules, or other forms of intentional content abstractable from the material setting of what one is doing. Practical coping instead discloses things themselves freed from intentional intermediaries. Second, these "things" are not discrete objects, but an interconnected setting organized around one's practical concerns. A fast-breaking basketball player is directed not just toward the ball she dribbles, but also toward the basket, the defenders, the teammates trailing the play or setting up on the wing, the cacophony of the crowd; or rather, to none of these things separately but toward the game in all its complexly articulated interrelatedness. Third, practical comportment is not a self-contained sequence of movements, but a flexible responsiveness to a situation as it unfolds. The situation is thus not a determinate arrangement of objects but the setting of some possible comportments. Some ways of responding to the situation are "called for," while others are out of place. These are not, however, a denumerable set of "actual" possibilities in hand, but the portent of some indeterminately "possible" ones.

This situational character of practical coping is an analogue to other intentional manifestations in a particular aspect or under a description. Intentional directedness traditionally has a sense, a particular "way" in which its object is manifest. Dreyfus takes this aspectual character of practical coping to be neither an "objective" characteristic of the things manifested, nor a definite projection or anticipation by an agent, but rather an intra-active configuration of solicited activity and possible resistance and accord.

In everyday absorbed coping, ... when one's situation deviates from some optimal body-environment relationship, one's movement takes one close to that optimal form and thereby relieves the "tension" of the deviation. One's body is solicited by the situation to get into the right relation to it. ... Our activity is completely geared into the demands of

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2 Karen Barad, "Meeting the Universe Halfway: Realism and Social Constructivism Without Contradiction," in Feminism, Science and the Philosophy of Science, ed. Lynn Hankinson Nelson and Jack Nelson (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1996), p. 161-194, coins this term in her discussion of scientific apparatus and the phenomena it measures, to emphasize that neither measurement apparatus nor objects measured are determinately identifiable prior to or apart from specific forms of encounter "between" them. Similarly here, neither activity nor the world's resistance or accommodation to it are determinate apart from their mutual intra-action.
The situation is significant, and configured as a field of relevance, at least for the body that is set to respond appropriately.

The intra-activity of this manifestation reinforces Dreyfus's insistence that practical coping takes us directly to the things themselves. We can think in the absence of what is thought about, without losing the sense of our thoughts. To dribble in the absence of the basketball, however, is merely to pretend to dribble (or to fail to dribble). The activity is entirely different if there is no actual pattern of resistance and affordance to what one does, for practical coping is a responsiveness to such patterns. It is directed toward the actual environment, not toward some merely possible state of affairs. Thus, unlike familiar accounts of mental or linguistic intentionality, practical coping cannot coherently express its sense of a non-existent object. Such coping activities can indeed fail to engage their surroundings effectively. When that happens, however, intentional comportment at least momentarily falls apart. In reaching for a light switch that isn't there, or stepping towards the landing one stair too soon, I thrash or stumble, failing for the moment to get a coherent grip on anything without some adjustment. Unsuccessful moves are not senseless, but their sense is not even successfully expressed, let alone fulfilled.

This feature of the intentionality of practical comportment highlights Dreyfus's conjoining of two points that have often been conceived in opposition to one another. Practical comportment is a thoroughly material responsiveness to a material world. The hand that gently conforms itself to the contours of a teacup in a well-balanced grasp, the softball player who tracks the incoming fly ball and the tagging runner at third as she sets herself to catch and throw home in a single fluid response, or the conversationalist whose stance, expressions, gestures, and tones register and respond to the expressive posture of her interlocutor are bodily engagements with a material configuration of the world. Yet these are also meaningfully configured situations. For the softball player, the looping fly and the tagging runner stand out as salient, while the airplane passing overhead and the brawl in the stands behind third base recede into indeterminate background, even though the airplane and the brawl may be bigger, louder, and more "dramatic," than the ball and the runner along similar sight lines. The meaningfulness of bodily responsiveness to situations becomes obtrusive when a philosophical or psychological analysis omits it. Thus, Dreyfus tellingly objected to attempts to reduce situations to "merely" physical juxtapositions of things:

[AI researcher John] McCarthy seems to assume that ["being at home"] is the same thing as being in my house, that is, that it is a physical state. But I can be at home and be in the backyard, that is, not physically in my house at all. I can also be physically in my house and not be at home; for example, if I own the house but have not yet moved my furniture in. Being at home is a human situation.  

There "is" nothing there in the situation besides its material constituents, but the situation is a meaningful configuration of those constituents. As Dreyfus put it, "the meaningful objects embedded in their context of references among which we live are not a model of the world, ...

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3 Hubert Dreyfus, "The Hermeneutic Approach to Intentionality," presented to the 18th Annual Meeting of the Society for Philosophy and Psychology, Montreal, Quebec. 1992, p. 3

they are the world itself."

What "configures" a situation is the possibility of intelligible response to it by a being to whom the situation and its outcome matters. A situation is thus organized as a field of possible activity with something at stake. Dreyfus's Heideggerian account of situatedness structurally resembles Kant's conception of agency as the "end" of a practical stance toward the world as "means." Human beings are that "for-the-sake-of-which" a situation is meaningfully oriented; its constituents are "in-order-to" realize some possible way of being a "for-the-sake-of-which." The stakes in a situation, however, are not some more or less definite end, but a way of being: an open-ended practical grasp of how to make one's way in the world as a teacher, a gay man, a politically engaged citizen, a parent, a Presbyterian, a tough SOB, etc. Such ways of being are not definite plans of action directed toward the achievement of specific ends, but an ongoing integration of one's activities within a coherent "practice." Moreover, wielding relevant equipment and interacting with other practitioners is not an indifferently instrumental taking up of various discrete "means" to chosen ends, but a referentially interrelated in-order-to-for-the-sake-of complex which sustains the intelligibility of its "component" practices and equipment.

The normativity that marks practical coping as genuinely intentional might thus seem pragmatic instead of alethic, marked by success or failure in dealing with circumstances and fulfilling various roles, rather than correct representation. Successful coping, however, is not the fulfillment of pre-specifiable success conditions, but instead the maintenance and development of one's belonging to a practice through a flexible responsiveness to circumstances (think of successfully riding a bicycle across changing terrain). It would be better, therefore, to blur any such contrast between practical success and alethic disclosure. Not only does Dreyfus follow Heidegger in seeing practical coping as a kind of revealing; he explicitly denies any sharp contrast between acting and perceiving. Perceiving is neither a passive registration nor an intellectual synthesis, but is itself a kind of coping activity. Seeing a moving object, hearing spoken words, tasting a liquid, or feeling a texture requires an appropriate bodily set and a coordinated exploratory movement. Likewise, sustained activities involve a perceptive attentiveness to relevant circumstances, what Heidegger calls a "circumspective" (umsichtig) concern. Hence, pragmatic success and alethic disclosure should be understood to belong together.

We can now see an additional reason why a situation is not identical to a "merely" physical juxtaposition of objects. The situations that call for practical coping are constitutively temporal. The intentional directedness of an embodied agent does not just extend spatially beyond itself toward the object of its concerns. It is also a temporal directedness ahead toward the possible activities that would sustain its way of being. Such a situated directedness toward intelligible possibilities does not exist apart from actual configurations of equipment that can engage extant bodily repertoires of responsiveness, repertoires that must themselves be maintained and developed over time. A situation thereby incorporates a history; the present situation is both the outcome of a history embedded within it, and a solicitation toward and portent of possible futures.

This "historical" dimension of practical coping is perhaps most evident in the disciplining

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5 Dreyfus, *What Computers Can't Do*, p. 266.

of bodies. Bodily repertoires for coping with surroundings are "produced by a specific technology of manipulation and formation." Both the pervasive normalization of "das Man" and the bodily disciplines described by Foucault are ways in which bodily capacities are shaped and refined by physical surroundings and other bodily responses. These capacities are not produced by habitual repetition of movements, however, but by constraining and redirecting a body's active exploratory coping with its surroundings. Bodies are the assimilation of past practice refocused toward future possibilities; their capacities are neither causally imposed from without nor freely generated from within, but instead mark the ongoing intra-active configuration of a bodily field of activity. Bodies are situated within fields of power relations, without thereby becoming disempowered.

Recognition of the role of Foucauldian disciplines in shaping practical coping capacities might mistakenly suggest that the body as meaningful practical repertoire could be assembled from meaningless motions. After all, Foucault described techniques for the analysis and reconstruction of movements, "a breakdown of the total gesture into two parallel series: that of the parts of the body to be used and that of the parts of the object manipulated, then the two sets of parts are correlated together according to a number of simple gestures [in] canonical succession." (1977, p. 153). Yet Dreyfus has repeatedly emphasized that such reconstructions cannot take full effect until the reconstructed sequence has been assimilated into a smooth bodily flow that revises and continues to adapt the initially practiced routines. The body that proceeds step by step in specified movements is the incompetent, inflexible body. The steps from learning to mastery shed the initially specified cues and patterns in favor of a fluid, adaptive responsiveness to meaningfully configured circumstances.

To recapitulate briefly, practical coping is "intentional" in two crucial respects. First, it is directed toward a situation under an aspect, which is constituted by the interrelations between how one comports oneself toward it, and what that comportment is for. How one reaches for, grasps, lifts, and tilts a cup gets its coherence from the cup's being for-sipping-from, and from the ways coffee-drinking belongs to a larger field of activity. Second, its directedness is normative: it can succeed or fail. Yet coping diverges from familiar renditions of intentionality in several crucial ways. It involves no psychological or semantic intermediaries, not even tacitly pre-determined success conditions (which are instead flexible and open-ended). Nor is the body an intermediary, but is instead the intentional directedness itself: one does not form one's hand into a cup shape and move it to a presumed cup-location; one's hand reaches for and adjusts to the cup itself. Coping is thus always directed toward actual possibilities rather than a possible actuality. Its success is not the fulfillment of some determinately projected end, but an ongoing accommodation to what is afforded by circumstances. Failure, in turn, is not the expression of an unfulfilled sense, but an unconsummated expressiveness. One partially loses a grip on one's surroundings, without thereby getting hold of a setting that does not happen to exist. Finally, while bodily comportment is complex, it is not compositional: its "constituents" are not separable component movements, but merely distinguishable moments of a unified whole. Indeed, while one often acquires coping skills by practicing discrete component movements, their residual discreteness marks a possible failure of intentionality; they succeed only when

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transformed by assimilation into a relatively fluid unity.

II--Intentional Contrasts to Coping

Dreyfus has long argued that the intentionality of practical coping is distinct from and irreducible to other modes of intentional directedness. In particular, he takes the explicit articulation of propositional content, theoretical understanding, and social normativity to be distinct forms of intentional directedness that co-exist with practical coping (although possibly "founded" upon it). In this section, I shall briefly describe the contrasts that Dreyfus articulates between these various modes of intentional directedness.

Dreyfus's contrast between practical coping and explicit articulation is subtle and complex. First, it would be wrong to say that practical coping involves a "tacit" understanding embedded in skillful dealings with things. That would mistakenly suggest that skills are already propositionally contentful, even though their content is not explicitly spoken or kept in mind. Dreyfus insists instead that skillful coping does not have even tacit propositional content. Beliefs, desires, and other propositional attitudes are not appropriately attributed as background to coping skills; instead, Dreyfus argues that propositional attitudes are only intelligible against a background of non-propositional comportments.

Dreyfus then distinguishes two successive levels of explication of coping skills (three, if one includes theoretical explication, discussed below). At the first level, the as-structure goes from being hidden in the understanding to being contextually explicit. We can, for example, notice that our hammer is too heavy, and ask for another one. Language is thus used in a shared context that is already meaningful, and gets its meaning by fitting into and contributing to this meaningful whole.

A second level of explication occurs when contextual explication is not just attended to, but actually expressed linguistically. Thus, in pointing out the characteristic of the hammer that needs attention I can "take a step back" from the immediate activity and attribute a "predicate" ("too heavy") to the hammer as "subject." This singles out the hammer and selects the difficulty of the hammering from a lot of other characteristics.

Dreyfus's contrast of practical coping to explicit interpretation thus cannot be identified as a contrast between pre-discursive and discursive intentionality. Language use can emerge at every level that Dreyfus identifies. Practical coping can employ language, as when one "communicates without wasting words"; it can take place through language use, as when one smoothly sustains the rhythm and flow of a conversation; and it can even be exhibited in one's ability to speak, as the articulate native speaker who "inhabits" a language differs from both language learners and less articulate speakers who struggle to find the right words (all of whom differ from those who confront a language as a code to be deciphered).

In the end, I think, the important contrast for Dreyfus is not between practical coping and

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9 Dreyfus attributes this distinction to Heidegger, and takes Heidegger's use of Auslegung (interpretation) to single out the "contextual explication" involved in noticing, repairing, replacing, adjusting, and otherwise shifting attention from the task at hand to how that task is being performed. I think this attribution is mistaken; Auslegung also includes the ways one takes up specific possibilities in Dreyfus's "practical coping." This is not the place to dispute the interpretation of Heidegger, however; both positions are philosophically interesting and worthy of discussion.


11 Dreyfus, Being-in-the-World, p. 211.
the use of language, but between coping and propositional contentfulness. For one thing, Dreyfus is often less concerned with the content of assertions than with that of mental states. He explicitly distinguishes the intentionality of practical coping from "that of a mind with content directed toward objects"; the latter only arises when ongoing coping is held up [and] we have to act deliberately. ... If a doorknob we ordinarily use transparently sticks, we find ourselves believing the doorknob should turn, trying to turn it, desiring that it should turn, expecting the door to open, etc.  

The most crucial contrast between coping and (mental or linguistic) content, however, turns out to be the possibility of intentional comportment in the absence of its object.

In general, I can't exercise a skill except in conjunction with the appropriate equipment. On this most basic coping level, it turns out one cannot separate the intentional state from what satisfies it.

Not surprisingly, Dreyfus believes that one can coherently express thoughts or claims about absent things; he only insists that such contentful expression differs from the ways we cope with our surroundings in everyday practice, and indeed depends upon everyday coping to sustain its contentfulness. Dreyfus sees a more fundamental contrast to everyday practical coping exemplified in theoretical understanding. "Theory" for Dreyfus primarily has the Platonic sense of theoria, of wonder and disengagement from practical involvement, but he also regards scientific theories as the intentional realization of such an attitude. In regarding things "theoretically," Dreyfus claims, we suspend the practical, contextual interrelations through which we encounter and understand our everyday situation. In so doing, we uncover an alternative way to be a thing. Occurrent beings are revealed when Dasein takes a detached attitude toward things and decontextualizes them. Then things show up as independent of human purposes and even as independent of human existence.

Such theoretical disclosure can also be understood as a third level of making things explicit. Ordinary assertions express what we attend to in contextual explication, but they do so in ways that still depend upon practical contextual cues for their sense. Indexical expressions would be the most obvious examples of contextually dependent expressions, but Dreyfus also highlights Heidegger's example, 'The hammer is too heavy.' The transition to theorizing is twofold: it involves detaching one's interactions and assertions from their specific contextual involvements, and recontextualizing them within the systematic relationships expressed in theories. Dreyfus takes these recontextualizations to be either purely formal systems of rules, or systems of causal relationships. In the end, the latter probably reduce to formal systems, however, since he seems to equate causal powers with what is disclosed by causal laws governing natural kinds, and the formal interrelations among such laws.

Dreyfus acknowledges that even theoretical science has practical involvements, both the "skills and instruments [that] decontextualize things and their properties" and the mastery of

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12 Dreyfus, "The Hermeneutic Approach to Intentionality, p. 5.

13 Ibid.


15 Ibid.
the theoretical systems within which they are recontextualized. The intended contrast between practical coping and theoretical explication is thereby illuminated, however. Dreyfus asserts that "natural science, like any mode of existence, cannot make entirely explicit its projections, i.e., the basic assumptions and practical background skills in which the scientists dwell." But what could it mean to make anything "entirely explicit?" Dreyfus seems to take theories to be deductively closed formal systems. A fully explicit system would then be one that was not only capable of expressing every property of every object in its domain, but was also capable of expressing how to apply its own concepts and rules. That is not possible, because no rule or concept can determine its own correct application. Dreyfus asks us to imagine, however, a system that leaves out only the "assumptions and background skills" that specify the correct application of its own concepts. If these assumptions and skills were not themselves part of the object domain of the theory, then there might be a sense in which it could give (at least in principle) a "fully explicit" representation of its object domain.

This conception of the telos of theoretical understanding would explain why Dreyfus has so long insisted that the human sciences do not provide appropriate domains for theorizing at all. In the human sciences, he argues, the assumptions and background skills for the employment of concepts are themselves part of the object domain of a science. Thus, an anthropological account of gift-giving practices cannot just apply its own rules for distinguishing 'gifts' from 'exchanges' and 'insults', for the practices that sustain such distinctions for the gift-givers are themselves part of the anthropologist's domain of inquiry. Since these practices themselves involve flexible coping skills, Dreyfus argues, they do not admit of the kind of closure and relative completeness attainable in some of the natural sciences.

Social normativity has only emerged recently as a contrast to Dreyfus's account of the intentionality of practical coping. Initially, Dreyfus foregrounded the social dimension of practical intentionality. The in-order-to-for-the-sake-of structure in which everyday coping practices are significant is only sustained by a conformist institution and enforcement of norms. As distinctively social-normative accounts of intentionality have become more prominent, however, Dreyfus has begun to see an important difference in emphasis. The most basic intentional relation in practical coping, he now argues, is between a body and its environs.

... the most basic level of intentionality requires only individual pragmatic activity. The normative dimension of intentionality derives not from social propriety nor from truth conditions but from action-based success and failure. The larger complex of significance-relations in which such individual activity acquires its stakes must be understood to presuppose bodily coping skills. Indeed, in the end, Dreyfus assimilates the contrast between bodily coping and social normativity to the more basic contrast between practical coping and the explicit articulation of propositional content: "Public norms only become constitutive at the linguistic level, and language, itself, is built upon the significance-

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17 Dreyfus mentions Tyler Burge, Robert Brandom, and John Haugeland (with Wittgenstein and Sellars in the background) as prominent proponents of intentionality as social-normative. Haugeland's attribution of a strongly social-normative position to Heidegger has undoubtedly been an important spur for Dreyfus to articulate a divergence between them.

18 Dreyfus, "The Hermeneutic Approach to Intentionality, p. 2."
structure revealed by skilled activity.”

III--Overcoming the Contrasts

The principal target of my criticisms in this section is not Dreyfus's account of the intentionality of coping, but the opposing conceptions of explicit articulation, theoretical understanding, and social norms that inform the contrasts discussed above. I begin with explicit articulation in language, an especially interesting case because Dreyfus himself recognizes some of the limitations in that supposed contrast.

Dreyfus's core claim about language is that the understanding embodied in ongoing practical coping with one's surroundings cannot be made fully explicit in words. But what is it to make something explicit in words? Dreyfus's critical engagement with artificial intelligence research offers an initially plausible operational specification: a capacity is explicitly articulable if one could write a program that would enable a computer to simulate that capacity effectively. Certainly this conception of making something explicit has played a crucial formative role in Dreyfus's own work. An irony of this specification, however, is that in the light of Dreyfus's critique of AI, a primary example of a skillful coping capacity that cannot be made explicit is the ability to make something explicit. The conversational understanding and use of natural language has proven substantially intractable to formal, computational explication.

Why shouldn't explicit articulation in words then be regarded as exemplifying, rather than contrasting to, practical coping as a mode of intentionality? Dreyfus's own insistence on the irreducible practical/perceptual hearing of words rather than noises, and his recognition that articulate native speakers of a language exhibit a practical mastery comparable to other coping skills, strongly support this suggestion. Comparison to primarily "intellectual" skills such as chess mastery reinforces it. A competent chess player does not run through a large inventory of possible moves, but instead dwells within a configuration of the board fraught with significant possibilities. Similarly, a competent speaker does not run through a large inventory of possible expressions, but dwells within a richly configured field of articulative possibilities. Both chess master and speaker leave out of consideration a mass of legal moves and grammatical expressions that do not arise as relevant to the situation at hand. A situation calls for certain things to be said just as a chess position calls for some particular moves. If anything, explicit articulation is more dependent upon its sonorous or graphical material realization and stylized expressiveness than is chess play.

Making things explicit would then turn out to be the skillful use of words and sentences as equipment for coping with one's surroundings. Putting things in words would be a no more direct or immediate way of understanding them than would any other form of practical coping. Perhaps it is less so; language is among those tools that, once assimilated, reside permanently on the near side of our embodied engagement with the world. Physicist-philosopher Niels Bohr usefully captured the consequences of this closeness at hand: "We are suspended in language in

\[\text{Ibid., p. 8.}\]

\[\text{20 This specification is much too loose, because to capture Dreyfus's point, it must rule out simulations that reproduce the capacity in a radically different way (e.g., chess mastery would not be made explicit by a program that could defeat grandmasters through brute calculational power if, as Hubert Dreyfus, What Computers Can't Do: The Limits of Artificial Intelligence, 2nd edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) argues, grandmasters choose moves according to a situational gestalt). Yet the requisite similarity must not be specified so strictly that the "inexplicable" character of skills becomes trivially true.}\]
such a way that we cannot say what is up and what is down." In any case, the intelligibility of
the alleged contrast between a fully transparently explicit articulation and the partial opacity of
skillful coping depends upon a mysterious conception of articulation as possession of a "magic
language of the mind whose terms directly and necessarily express Fregean senses." Neither
words nor thoughts could be direct, complete, and transparent expressions of an ideal "content."
The absence of intrinsic limits to what can be expressed in words would no longer be troubling,
however, once words have been divested of such magical transcendence.

Dreyfus would nevertheless likely reject a conception of explicit articulation as entirely a
situated, practical coping with words and sentences as equipment for signifying. The principal
reason for his reluctance to accept discourse as fully belonging to coping practices is that one
can coherently talk about things in their absence. We have already seen how practical coping
skills fall apart in the absence of their intended setting. One can, by contrast, sensibly talk at
some length about unicorns, the Big Bang, even prime numbers larger than two, and machine
translation. We need, therefore, to reconsider this capacity to speak about absent things.

The classic Fregean or Husserlian account of this capacity is that such talk expresses an
ideal "sense," grasp of which then enables one to determine whether any extant things fulfill that
sense. The problem is that such representationalist accounts of meaning leave mostly opaque
what it is to articulate or understand a sense, and how one's expressions determine one sense
rather than another. Dreyfus responds in two stages. First he insists that much of everyday
discourse is not detached from its referential significance, but is instead contextually situated
amidst ongoing coping practices. Second, even when assertions are decontextualized, he follows
Heidegger in recognizing that they still take us directly to things, not to mental or linguistic
intermediaries. Yet he crucially qualifies this recognition:

"everyday truth is possible because assertions are a special sort of equipment. They can
be used to point not only to states of affairs that are right in front of us in the situation but
to states of affairs behind us, like the picture's being crooked, and even to states of affairs
that are somewhere else or have not yet occurred." This "special" character of assertions is, alas, left just as opaque as the direct mental grasp or
linguistic expression of a sense. The most that Dreyfus suggests to explicate this special
functional capacity is that while such assertions still remain globally dependent upon a
background of coping practices, their representation of absent things is mediated by

Kennedy, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1985), p. 302, quotes this remark as Bohr's characteristic
response in conversation to those who would claim that reality must be more fundamental then language in guiding
our understanding of the world. I owe special thanks to Barad, "Meeting the Universe Halfway," p. 175, for
bringing this passage to my attention.

22 Samuel C. Wheeler III, "True Figures: Metaphor, Social Relations, and the Sorites," in Hiley et al., The
Interpretive Turn, p. 200.

23 Naturalistic accounts of meaning rely upon the causal/functional role of an expression to fix its sense, but such
approaches are not open to Dreyfus, and in any case encounter other difficulties in both their mentalist and
pragmatist versions.

significations and the words that accrue to them.\textsuperscript{25}

A different approach to linguistic meaning offers an attractive way to assimilate asserting more fully within Dreyfus's own account of practical coping. Recall first that coping practices extend the intentional directedness of bodies into the world, at the far side of one's equipment. The driver proximally attends to the turn in the road, not the rotational angle of the steering wheel; the jump shooter attends to the rim, not her wrist action or her grip on the ball. Language use is likewise directed toward its surroundings, and like any other form of practical comportment, its coherence depends upon sustaining a practical hold upon actual circumstances. This is the point of Davidson's principle of charity and Brandom's insistence that semantic articulation requires objective accountability.\textsuperscript{26} Only if an overall pattern of utterances can be coherently connected to actual circumstances (in Davidson's terms, interpreted as mostly truthful) can they have semantic significance. A jump shooter can miss, and a speaker can utter falsehoods or use non-referring terms. But the shooter cannot miss too badly too often without thereby dissolving the intelligibility of her actions as playing basketball, and the speaker likewise cannot be too badly in error too often without failing to be a speaker. Like other practical coping activities, the sense of asserting falls apart unless it sustains a substantially "correct" hold on its actual circumstances.

What sustains the illusion that assertions are a "special" kind of equipment is the wordiness of the world. Basketball, carpentry, or driving are intelligible practices only within appropriately prepared settings that contain all or most of the right equipment (including other persons with the right sort of skills and self-interpretations). The same is true of asserting and other discursive practices, except that the appropriate equipment has so thoroughly pervaded our world that speaking is only rarely radically out of place. Moreover, the complex and nested interrelations of discursive practices enable many assertions to function primarily in relation to other assertions. It might seem that language use then becomes quite remote from ordinary things, until one recalls that words and their expressively combined utterance are themselves among the most pervasive of ordinary things. Words do not exist alongside one's surrounding environment as a parallel space of re-presentation; they are a thoroughly intertwined part of our surroundings, and a mastery of their use is integral to ongoing bodily coping practices.

The familiarity and pervasiveness of words then suggests a misplaced analogy. A relevant practical analogue to speaking of absent things might seem to be something like hammering in the absence of nails; the "special" character of asserting would then be manifest in contrasting the familiarity of the former to the absurdity of the latter. Hammers, however, "refer" not just to nails, but to the entire referential context of carpentry; similarly, assertions refer not just to their truth conditions narrowly construed, but to the whole setting in which such an assertion would be significant. In using a hammer, the context "withdraws" from attention to enable a focus upon the task at hand. The same is true for assertions, except that since the task at hand in asserting is typically to "point out" or make salient some aspect of the world, the apparent locality and transparency of its referentiality seems heightened. Once we understand that assertions also function through a practical grasp of their whole "context," however, we see the mistake. An appropriate analogue to speaking of absent things would instead be interlinked

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 215-17, 274.

\textsuperscript{26} Donald Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Robert Brandom, Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).
equipment that enables one to "act at a distance," as the mediation of other words does. The relevant analogue to speaking falsely would be hammering in the wrong place or at the wrong angle, not hammering in the absence of nails or boards. If there is a discursive analogue to the latter, it would be utterances that "make no sense," failing altogether to connect to their circumstances.

Undoing the contrast between practical coping and explicit articulation may nevertheless then seem to heighten the contrast between coping and theoretical reflection. To see why, consider first that the philosophical approach to language sketched in the preceding paragraphs would ground semantics in pragmatics rather than in any formal structure discernable within everyday uses of words. Words acquire expressive significance through their ongoing use as part of a larger pattern of significant practical dealings with one's surroundings. Yet it is manifestly possible to stand back from those everyday dealings and work out abstract, formal structures roughly exemplified in ongoing discursive practices. Even if such practices themselves are not realized through formal manipulations, their reconstruction as formal theoretical structures might mark a striking contrast to the intentionality of everyday coping. Indeed, Dreyfus seems to regard logic and formal semantics as a paradigm case of a theoretical reformulation of "data" decontextualized from ordinary coping practices.

As with explicit articulation, we therefore need to ask more carefully what it is to understand something "theoretically." The contrast between coping and making explicit turned out to rely on an inappropriate conception of what it is to express something in words. Might the same be true of the alleged contrast between coping and theorizing?

Dreyfus's contrast depends upon a threefold conception of theorizing. Theories are treated as formal structures (either uninterpreted axiomatic calculi or model-theoretic systems), theory-entry as decontextualization of "data," and theoretical understanding as disengaged "wonder." Space constraints prevent a direct strategy of arguing against the adequacy of each of these points in turn, although I note that philosophers of science have long abandoned anything resembling Dreyfus's conception of scientific data as decontextualized, while an attitude of disengaged wonder seems seriously to misconstrue the phenomenology of scientific theorizing. I shall instead suggest an alternative interpretation of theorizing that assimilates it to the intentionality of practical coping.

On this account, theories are tools that enable new ways of dealing with a variety of concrete situations. They are typically worked out as groups of models for how to apply

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27 This approach suggests an interesting reinterpretation of the famous "Chinese Room" argument against causal/functional role semantics in John Searle, Minds, Brains and Science (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). Searle is correct that someone who merely follows formal rules for manipulating symbols does not thereby understand or speak a language. The reason, however, is not that one's manipulations are not "expressed in symbols whose meanings are known to you" (Searle, Minds, Brains and Science, p. 33). It is that the practices of a rule-follower isolated in a room are not sufficiently integrated with other practices for coping with her surroundings to sustain their intelligibility.


theoretical terms or techniques, exemplified by the standard calculational models for classical dynamics, quantum mechanics or population genetics, or the descriptive models of Darwinian adaptation. Learning a theory is learning how to apply or adapt its models to various situations, and how to perform characteristic operations upon or within these models: until the most advanced level of scientific education, the principal mode of theory acquisition is problem-solving exercises. The domain of a theory is determined not by universally quantified application of abstractly specifiable predicates, but by the open-ended practical applicability of the available and conceivable models that articulate it.\textsuperscript{30}

Theories on this conception are not the intermediary of a novel mode of intentionality, but are instead a familiar kind of practical equipment. Their analogues are maps, diagrams, pictures, physical models, laboratory experiments,\textsuperscript{31} computer simulations, and other equipment which enables people to engage with their surroundings more effectively by connecting them to a constructed setting which can be dealt with in different ways. Like reading a map and connecting it to situationally relevant landmarks, using a theory involves not a disengaged observation of decontextualized data, but a situated attentiveness to aspects of one's situation that are significant both for mapping/theorizing practices and for the purposes one is employing the map/theory. Developing a theory, like mapmaking, involves an intercalated practical grasp and working out of possibilities both within the "world" of maps and the world mapped. Theories, like maps, pictures, and models, can evoke amazement for their compactness, richness, elegance, simplicity, or power, but their use and development are more like practical immersion in a task at hand than the contemplative wonder envisaged by Aristotle.

The illusion that theories are relatively self-enclosed formal systems has multiple sources, including the philosophical tradition whose commitment to the distinctive status of theoria Dreyfus has only partially challenged. Its primary basis, however, is the richness and complexity of some prominent theoretical practices such that a relatively autonomous engagement in theorizing becomes intelligible. In cases like formal logic, mathematical physics or population genetics, and much of mathematics itself, theoretical practices have developed their own "internal" issues and stakes, such that substantial effort is sometimes needed to sustain significant connections between "theoretically" interesting achievements and issues, and other practical contexts from which those concerns once emerged. Peter Galison's discussion of the emergence of "trading zones" among experimental physicists, theorists, and engineers, which elicit analogues to the pidgin and creole languages that emerge at the interfaces of cultural practices, both highlights this point, and forcefully resists any conception of theory as a radically different mode of intentional directedness.\textsuperscript{32}

A related basis for imagining theory as different in kind from practical comportment is the emergence of meta-theory: consistency and completeness proofs in logic, non-constructive


\textsuperscript{31} Widespread dealings with laboratories as familiar work-sites makes it easy to overlook the extent to which experimentation is a modeling practice not so different from theoretical modeling (the parallel is discussed more extensively in Rouse, Engaging Science, pp. 129-132, 228-29). The emergence of intermediate cases such as thought experiments and computer simulations highlight the parallel.

proofs that an equation has a solution, cladistic and pheneticist taxonomic theories, or the Gettier puzzle may seem especially remote from everyday practical concerns with argument, calculation, classification, or knowledge claims. Yet these are just further examples of theoretical practices with their own issues and stakes; their distance from "everyday" practice is no more surprising than that cartography raises issues quite remote from the concerns of those who only want to travel reliably from point A to point B. Brandom shows how even formal logic and semantics, which seemed initially to reinforce a distinction between practical engagement and theoretical reflection, are best regarded as a pragmatic extension of everyday discursive practices.  

Having proposed the assimilation of explicit articulation and theoretical reflection within Dreyfus's conception of the bodily intentionality of practical coping skills, I now turn to the third contrast. Should we still follow Dreyfus in distinguishing the intentional directedness of individually embodied agents from the emergence of social norms? In the other cases, Dreyfus criticized the philosophical priority often ascribed to explicit representation and theoretical disengagement as they have been traditionally conceived; I proposed going further, to reject altogether these traditional conceptions of theorizing and making explicit. Similarly, I suggest that we abandon the conception of social normativity that Dreyfus treats as derivative from practical coping skills. When we do so, we can better understand how such skills are irreducibly "social."

Social norms are typically invoked to understand how intentional directedness is accountable to authoritative standards. One's own standards will not do, for their authority can always be evaded by revising the standards. The normative accountability of individual performances might seem to be preserved, however, by understanding them as subject to the authority of the communities in which they participate. Such views encounter formidable obstacles: they purchase the accountability of individual thought and action at the price of placing community practices beyond criticism; they make changes in communities or their norms rationally unintelligible; and the "shared norms" or "community consensus" whose authority they invoke generally do not exist outside of philosophers' and social theorists' imagination. Dreyfus thus rightly rejects "the constitutive role of shared social norms [for] original intentionality."  

Yet it will also not do to locate the normativity of practical coping in the success or failure of individual activity. Philosophers who ground intentionality upon pragmatic success usually construe "success" naturalistically, e.g., in evolutionary terms. Dreyfus seems to want a more proximate (and non-naturalistic!) criterion of success, such as driving a nail or avoiding an obstacle. Yet why regard these as successes, rather than as failures to keep the nail out or to hit the target? One might try to answer such questions holistically, but that will not sustain the normative autonomy of individual action. Not only are the proximate "goals" of individual coping practices so closely intertwined with the practices and commitments of others that they

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33 Brandom, Making It Explicit, ch. 3, 5-8.
35 Rouse, Engaging Science.
resist identifications of practical goals as "mine" or "yours" (as Dreyfus himself convincingly shows!37). The normativity of such holistic interpretation of practical coping skills also thereby becomes unintelligible; what constrains the interpretation of hammering as nail-driving rather than as unsuccessful nail-obstruction?

The problem is instead with the construal of the "social" dimension of intentionality as a relation between individual agents and supra-individual "communities," what Brandom now rejects as an "I/We" conception of sociality.38 The social character of everyday coping is not a matter of subordination to a community, but of intra-action with other agents whom we recognize in practice as intentionally directed toward a shared world (not shared norms or beliefs about that world).39 Through such intra-action and recognition, understanding and articulation acquire their intentional directedness as aspectual and accountable—an "understanding" of the world is only meaningful if there are alternatives, and the possibility of being mistaken. Yet this constitutive recognition of the partiality and accountability of one's practical grasp of the world does not require the postulation of a "sovereign" standpoint that could adjudicate once and for all what success or truth would consist in.40 The ineliminably social character of being-in-the-world is not a relationship to some supra-individual entity within the world, but is instead how the world has a hold on us through our intra-action with "others," such that there is something at stake in ongoing coping with one's surroundings. There is much more to be said about how it is that such stakes arise and "bind" us, but the recognition of one's engagement with and accountability to "others" must surely be a non-contingent aspect of any adequate account.

In the end, these challenges to Dreyfus's proposed contrasts between practical coping and explicit articulation, theoretical understanding, and accountability to "social" norms should not be regarded as criticisms of his philosophical project. If I am right, the core commitments of Dreyfus's phenomenological conception of the intentionality of practical coping constitute an even more radical and, I believe, successful challenge to the philosophical tradition than he himself has ever been willing to acknowledge. In the world we inhabit, there are no magic languages, no decontextualizing theories, and no supra-individual consensus communities.


38 Brandom, Making It Explicit.

39 Brandom, Making It Explicit, perhaps misleadingly calls such intra-active recognition an "I/Thou" conception of the social, misleading because it suggests an interaction between already intentional agents rather than a constitutively intra-active practical "recognition."
