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## Practices, Practical Holism, and Background Practices

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### I Beginning with Practices

“Begin with practices.”<sup>1</sup> The importance of beginning with practices is a theme that runs through much of Hubert Dreyfus’s work on Heidegger, cognitive science, and artificial intelligence. Beginning with practices can help us to see how phenomena as diverse as consciousness, intentionality, rule-following, knowledge, and representation presuppose skills, habits, and customs, and so cannot be made fully explicit. Drawing on Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, Foucault, and Wittgenstein, he has argued that these phenomena involve a practical dimension that cannot be formally analyzed, and consequently cannot be used as autonomous points of departure in our attempts to understand ourselves and our world. The principal aim of this paper is to critically examine Dreyfus’s notion of a practice and his arguments for the primacy of practice. Why should we begin with practices, and how does this lead to the conclusion that it is impossible to give a formal analysis of our practical abilities?

Stephen Turner’s *The Social Theory of Practices*, a recent critique of the turn toward practices, provides a helpful point of departure. The book begins with two exemplary quotations, the first from Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*, the second by Dreyfus:

“But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.”

"Heidegger argues that . . . even when people act deliberately, and so have beliefs, plans, follow rules, etc., their minds cannot be directed toward something except on a background of shared social practices."

Practices, it would appear, are the vanishing-point of twentieth-century philosophy. The major philosophical achievements of the century are now widely interpreted as assertions about practices, even though they were not originally couched in this language.<sup>2</sup>

After observing that the notion of practice has its origins in the domain of social theory, Turner observes that it has recently become extremely widespread, not only in philosophy, but also in fields as diverse as literary criticism, feminist scholarship, rhetorical analysis, studies of the discourse of science, artificial intelligence, and anthropology. Yet it is extremely difficult to bring that vanishing point into focus:

But the concept is deeply elusive. What are "practices"? What is being referred to, for example, by Wittgenstein's phrase "the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false"? What are "tacit pictures of the world"? These are not everyday objects. And they are given additional, mysterious properties—they are said to be "shared," or "social." How seriously should we take this language? Are there really objectifiable things that we should think of as being shared or inherited? Or are these merely figures of speech? And if so, why should we be willing to accept them as part of the explanation of anything as central as truth or intentionality? What do they stand for that enables them to play this kind of central role in our thought?<sup>3</sup>

In this opening passage, Turner already hints at a dilemma that is elaborated in the pages that follow: either practices are substantial, shared objects whose nature needs to be clarified, or they are insubstantial, nothing more than "figures of speech." However, the accounts of practice he considers presuppose that practices are mental entities which explain community members' common patterns of action and are socially transmitted. He goes on to argue that the notion of a practice as a "shared possession" is incoherent, "causally ludicrous." For a shared practice must "be transmitted from person to person. But no account of the acquisition of practices that makes sense causally supports the idea that the same internal thing, the same practice, is reproduced in another person."<sup>4</sup> Turner is surely right that if we conceive of practices as akin to tacit beliefs—

hidden, inner objects, that are causally responsible for our behavior—then the very notion of a social theory of practice is ludicrous, and there are insuperable difficulties in understanding how the very same thing can be passed on from one person to another.

Rather than following Turner's recommendation that we reject the notion of practice in favor of talk of "habits," patterns of behavior that do not presuppose a concealed, causally efficacious object, we would do better to ask whether there is a way of conceiving of practices that avoids these liabilities. Both Heidegger and Wittgenstein, two of the most important influences on Dreyfus's conception of practice, were deeply critical of philosophers who postulate inner objects in order to explain what we say and do. Indeed, Turner's objections to conceiving of practices as hidden inner objects have striking affinities with Wittgenstein's critique of the notion of inner mental objects.

## II Theoretical Holism and Practical Holism

Dreyfus follows Heidegger and Wittgenstein in conceiving of practices as a matter of publicly accessible action, patterns of saying and doing; like them, he is deeply opposed to conceiving of them in terms of mysterious inner objects. Toward the beginning of his book on *Being and Time* he gives a summary of his reasons for thinking that social practices cannot be understood as objects, or as a belief system implicit in the minds of individual subjects. Dreyfus reads Heidegger as arguing that our shared agreement in our practices, our "*pretheoretical* understanding of being"<sup>5</sup> cannot be set out as a belief system because it does not consist of beliefs at all:

There are no beliefs to get clear about; there are only skills and practices. These practices do not arise from beliefs, rules, or principles, and so there is nothing to make explicit or spell out. We can only give an interpretation of the interpretation already in the practices. . . . [A]n explication of our understanding of being can never be complete because we dwell in it—that is, it is so pervasive as to be both nearest to us and farthest away—and also because there are no beliefs to get clear about.<sup>6</sup>

There is an excellent exposition of the nature of these commitments, and their implications for a conception of practice in "Holism

and Hermeneutics," a paper written some ten years earlier. There Dreyfus introduces a contrast between two kinds of holism: theoretical holism, the view that all understanding is a matter of interpreting between theories, and practical holism, the view that while understanding "involves explicit beliefs and hypotheses, these can only be meaningful in specific contexts and against a background of shared practices."<sup>7</sup> Quine's views about interpretation are his chosen example of theoretical holism; Heidegger's hermeneutics in *Being and Time* his principal example of practical holism:

The Quinean *theoretical* circle results from what Heidegger calls *Vorsicht*, i.e., from the fact that all verification takes place within a theory, and that there is no way out of the circle of holistic hypotheses and evidence. The Heideggerian *hermeneutic* circle, on the other hand, says that this whole theoretical activity of framing and confirming hypotheses takes place not only on the background of explicit or implicit assumptions but also on a background of practices (the *Vorhabe*) which need not—and indeed cannot—be included as specific presuppositions of the theory, yet already define what could count as a confirmation. Thus all our knowledge, even our attempt to know the background, is always already shaped by what might be called our implicit ontology, an "ontology" which is in our practices as ways of behaving towards things and people, not in our minds as background assumptions which we happen to be taking for granted.<sup>8</sup>

According to the ontological hermeneutics of both Heidegger and Wittgenstein, when we understand another culture we come to share its *know-how and discriminations* rather than arriving at agreement concerning which *assumptions and beliefs* are true. This coordination comes about not by making a translation, or cracking a code, but by prolonged everyday interaction; the result is not a commensuration of theories but what Heidegger calls "finding a footing" and Wittgenstein refers to as "finding one's way about."<sup>9</sup>

This practical background is not an agreement in beliefs, but in ways of acting and speaking. As Wittgenstein puts it, "What people say is true and false; and they agree in the *language*. That is not agreement in opinions, but in form of life."<sup>10</sup> Without these shared skills, communication would be impossible. The theoretical holist will reply that even if such a background is necessary,

one will be able to analyze that background in terms of further mental states. Insofar as background practices contain knowledge, they must be based on

implicit beliefs; insofar as they are skills, they must be generated by tacit rules. This leads to the notion of a holistic network of intentional states, a tacit belief system, that is supposed to underlie every aspect of orderly human activity, even everyday background practices.<sup>11</sup>

In turn, the practical holist will respond that it is a mistake to assume that there must be a theory lying behind our practices, to postulate tacit belief whenever explicit beliefs cannot be found:

*What makes up the background is not beliefs*, either explicit or implicit, but habits and customs, embodied in the sort of subtle skills which we exhibit in our everyday interaction with things and people. . . . While one may, indeed, on reflection treat aspects of the background as specific beliefs, as for example beliefs about how far to stand from people, these ways of acting were not learned as beliefs and it is not as beliefs that they function causally in our behaviour. We just do what we have been trained to do. Moreover, as practices, they have a flexibility which is lost when they are converted into propositional knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, a great deal depends on just how one conceives of skills in this connection, and Dreyfus pursues a number of complementary expository strategies in explaining his conception of skills. One is to appeal to the accounts offered by other philosophers who have given skills a fundamental role; in the context from which the passage I have quoted is taken, Dreyfus glosses the "subtle skills" in question as Foucault's "micropractices," connecting this with Wittgenstein's dictum that it is "our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game"<sup>13</sup> and shortly afterward draws on Heidegger's notion of "primordial understanding"<sup>14</sup> as a way of discussing the role of practice as a noncognitive precondition of understanding. Indeed, one can read much of *Being-in-the-World*, Dreyfus's commentary on Division I of *Being and Time*, in just this way. A complementary strategy, particularly helpful with an audience unfamiliar with these philosophers, and thus particularly prominent in *What Computers Still Can't Do* is to make use of striking examples of skills. Swimming, cycling, and skiing are all favored examples of motor skills; chess, the prime example of an intellectual skill; and conversational competence, the preferred example of a social skill. Each example has its own strengths, but the microskills involved in fluidly conducting a conversation are particularly relevant here, as they can serve to illustrate just how much

familiarity with a culture is needed before one can be counted as a competent conversationalist. Such skills embody an interpretation of an entire culture:

And just as we can learn to swim without consciously or unconsciously acquiring a theory of swimming, we acquire these social background practices by being brought up in them, not by forming beliefs and learning rules. A specific example of such a social skill is the conversational competence involved in standing the correct distance from another member of the culture depending on whether the other person is male or female, old or young, and whether the conversation involves business, courtship, friendship, etc. More generally, and more importantly, such skills embody a whole cultural interpretation of what it means to be a human being, what a material object is, and, in general, what counts as real. This is why Heidegger in *Being and Time* calls this cultural self-interpretation embodied in our practices "primordial truth."<sup>15</sup>

But before we look more closely at arguments that draw on specific examples of social skills it will be helpful to consider an even more direct strategy: saying what practices are, and why they matter.

### III What Are Practices?

Here it will be helpful to turn to a position paper published at the same time as the Heidegger book, which starts by addressing precisely these concerns about the nature of practice:

Begin with practices, not with consciousness. What are practices? What is in the practices? How do they fit together? What is our relation to them?<sup>16</sup>

The paragraphs that follow provide telegraphic summaries of his replies to each of these four questions. The answer to the first reads:

1. Practices are *social skills*. By *skills* I mean to capture two aspects of the practices. (1) Skills are not based on representations—that is, on beliefs or rules—nor can they be analyzed in terms of, or generated by, formal structures. They are passed on by society through individuals without necessarily passing through consciousness (Foucault, Bourdieu.) (2) Skills have rich interconnections so that modifications of any part of the system of skills will modify the others.

By *social skills*, I mean that there is a convergence of skills, that is, everyone does things roughly the same way. If there are deviations, they are not coerced and coopted. People just naturally conform to what everyone does.

Social practices are what one does. If you thematize that, you get the idea of *norms*, although the people who are acting them out do not think of their practices as norms. Modern norms have a special character Foucault calls *normalization*. Norms seem to be based on truth—there is a right way of doing things. Norms are not merely what one does, but what one *ought* to do. This is not a necessary aspect of the structure of social skills; it is an aspect of the structure of *modern* social skills.<sup>17</sup>

Notice that the very first part of the answer already takes for granted the conclusion of the argument that will be the focus of this paper: "Skills are not based on representations—that is, on beliefs or rules—nor can they be analyzed in terms of, or generated by, formal structures." The remainder of this passage sketches an argument for this conclusion. The point is not simply that skills are not usually taught by means of explicit instructions or rules; but that as a matter of fact, many skills cannot be acquired in this way. Instead, they are "passed on," as Dreyfus puts it here: one learns "what one does" by means of conformism: "People just naturally conform to what everyone does." The second paragraph, on the social character of skills, argues that while skills cannot be approached individualistically, the social dimension to skillful activity may simply be a matter of conformism, and so does not presuppose a grasp of norms—what one does in a given situation—and normativity—what one ought to do. Instead, norms and normativity, arise out of, and depend on, a more primitive circumstance: people tend to converge on doing things in roughly the same way. However, this emphasis on the training of behavior is only part of the story, for socialization into a set of practices amounts to nothing less than an understanding of existence, an understanding that we embody. This leads up to the subject of some of the subsequent questions Dreyfus sets himself, from which it emerges that this conception of practice has extremely far-reaching philosophical implications:

2. What is in the practices? In social practices there is an understanding of what it is to be a person, what it is to be an object, what it is to be an institution, and these all fit together and are an understanding of what it is to be.

4. What is our relation to the practices? That is, in fact, the wrong way to ask the question, since it suggests that there is us, and then there are

practices. Rather, we *are* the practices. They set up a *Spielraum* of possibilities of action for us, and this space of possibilities is not something that we have a relation to, but something *embodied* in us. "We are the world existing," Heidegger would say. . . . This idea that we are a clearing or opening is my interpretation of the self as transcendence, or better, as transcending.<sup>18</sup>

We can put aside Dreyfus's third question about practices—how do they fit together?—until later, for it is a question about the extent to which practices share a common structure, a question that is best considered once the outlines of the overall approach are clearer.<sup>19</sup> The following passage condenses the train of thought we have just been considering still further, summarizing the argument I have just outlined into a few terse and deceptively simple sentences:

To explain our actions and rules, humans must eventually fall back on everyday practices and simply say, "This is what one does." In the final analysis, all intelligent behavior must hark back to our sense of what we *are*. We can never explicitly formulate this in clear-cut rules and facts; therefore, we cannot program computers to possess that kind of know-how.<sup>20</sup>

Given the richness of the conception of everyday practice Dreyfus is working with, talking of harking "back to what we *are*," while not in itself misleading, certainly takes a great deal for granted for so much depends on how one understands the appeal to "what we *are*." One way of spelling out this notion that there is only so much to be said by way of explaining why we do what we do, is to be found in passages in Wittgenstein's *Investigations* that echo many of these concerns:

The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.

—How do I explain the meaning of "regular," "uniform," "same," to anyone?—I shall explain these words to someone who, say, only speaks French by means of the corresponding French words. But if a person has not yet got the *concepts*, I shall teach him to use the words by means of *examples* and by *practice*.—And when I do this I do not communicate less to him than I know myself.

How can he *know* how he is to continue a pattern by himself—whatever instruction you give him?—Well, how do I know?—If that means "Have I reasons?" the answer is: my reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act, without reasons.

"How am I able to obey a rule?"—, if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule in the way that I do.

If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do."<sup>21</sup>

But here, if not before, one wants to ask: why have we "reached bedrock"? Why can't we explicitly formulate what we ordinarily take for granted and teach by means of examples of practice? Dreyfus, like the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, and unlike the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, does not think that we must come to a full stop at this point, that even when the reasons a competent speaker can supply have come to an end, there is still more that can be said. In particular, we need an explanation as to why skills can't be taught by means of explicit instructions or rules, and instead must be "passed on . . . through individuals." To appeal to "what we are" or to say "this is simply what I do" is not so much an argument as a placeholder for one, to presume that it has already been shown. In what follows, we will consider a number of different ways of defending this claim.

#### IV Why Can't Background Practices Be Made Completely Explicit?

"Hermeneutics and Holism" proposes two principal reasons for concluding that our background practices cannot be spelled out in a theory:

1. the background is so pervasive that we cannot make it an object of analysis
2. the practices involve skills<sup>22</sup>

The background is "pervasive" because of its intimate role in every aspect of our lives; as Dreyfus puts it in a Heideggerian turn of phrase quoted at the beginning of section II, we "dwell" in it. It is difficult to find a way of putting this point without recourse to a simile: background practices are like water to a fish, or the light we see by, or the vantage point from which we see, so near to us and for that very reason furthest away, that we are unable to get at a critical distance

from them. However, Dreyfus immediately goes on to qualify his endorsement of the first line of argument by saying that it presupposes the second, for "if it were merely the pervasiveness of one's own background which made it inaccessible to theory, it could be made the object of theoretical analysis by another culture, or, perhaps, another stage of one's own culture."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, once one qualifies the argument in this way it is unclear how much force, if any, it has left, for the qualification opens up the possibility that we ourselves might arrive at a stage in our development where we are sufficiently distant from a background we once took for granted that we are able to make it completely explicit. After all, if the only reason the background cannot be made fully explicit were that in any act of understanding one always has to take something for granted, then the argument would be no better than trying to show that one cannot see everything because one always has to look from somewhere, and one cannot see the place that one looks from.

This problem does seem to affect the following attempt by Charles Taylor to show that the idea that one can make the background completely explicit is "incoherent in principle":

There must always be a context from which we are attending if we are to understand the experience of a being [with engaged agency]. So bringing to articulation still supposes a background. . . . We do some of it now, so why not, bit by bit, do all of it eventually? But if we treat it as a standing condition of intelligibility, from which we have to attend . . . then the incoherence of this notion becomes clear. . . . [The background] can be made explicit, because we aren't completely unaware of it. But the explicating itself supposes a background. The very fashion in which we operate as engaged agents within such a background makes the prospect of total explicating incoherent.<sup>24</sup>

The "pervasiveness" argument, while important for the light it casts on the role of background practices in our lives, cannot, by itself, show as much as Taylor believes. And even if it succeeds in showing that it is in principle not possible to articulate everything, it does not show that there is anything, that is, in principle, impossible to articulate. This leads us back to the second train of argument: that the background cannot be spelled out in a theory because the practices involve skills.

As we saw in section II, the standard theoretical holist strategy in responding to practical holism is to treat practices as a system of beliefs, to be analyzed in terms of constituent beliefs. The point of the turn to skills in Dreyfus's second train of argument is that they are not intentional states and so lack the sort of content that would be explicated by such an analysis. One of the morals of Dreyfus's detailed discussion of specific skills is to get us to see that they play a very different role in our lives to beliefs—to attempt to assimilate them to explicit propositional attitudes would be to misrepresent both the way in which they are learned, and their role in our actions. To put the point in Rylean terms, know-how is not reducible to knowledge that. Here, it is helpful to consider familiar examples of skillful activity which do not lend themselves to a formal analysis:

Most of us know how to ride a bicycle. Does that mean we can formulate specific rules to teach someone else how to do it? How would we explain the difference between the feeling of falling over and the sense of being slightly off-balance when turning? And do we really know, until the situation occurs, just what we would do in response to a certain wobbly feeling? No, we don't. Most of us are able to ride a bicycle because we possess something called "know-how," which we have acquired from practice and sometimes painful experience. That know-how is not accessible to us in the form of facts and rules. If it were, we would say we "know that" certain rules produce proficient bicycle riding.

There are innumerable other aspects of daily life that cannot be reduced to "knowing that." Such experiences involve "knowing how." For example, we know how to carry on an appropriate conversation with family, friends, and strangers in a wide variety of contexts—in the office, at a party, and on the street.<sup>25</sup>

Here, bicycle riding figures as an example of a motor skill, something we know how to do, but are unable to provide a procedural specification of how to do it. At the end of this passage, a parallel point is made for a social skill: knowing how to carry on a conversation. The boundaries between the two kinds of skills are not, perhaps, as clear as one might think at first. For a beginner, bicycle riding is primarily a matter of physical coordination, but later on, learning to ride in traffic can be as much a social skill as conducting a conversation; and many of our bodily movements in an ordinary conversation are as unreflective as the ones involved in balancing a bicycle.

However that may be, both cases are examples of a knack for doing something, a know-how, that cannot be articulated entirely in assertions. But how much comfort can we draw from the fact that this knowledge is "not accessible to us in the form of facts and rules"? Two different, albeit related claims, seem to be packed in here. First, there is a phenomenological point: we don't, at least for the most part, experience our knowledge of how to ride a bicycle, or carry on an appropriate conversation, as a matter of explicitly formulating rules. Even though one might from time to time say such things as "lean to the side you want to steer toward" or "don't dominate the conversation," this is only the tip of the iceberg. Even these explicit instructions depend on a grasp of how one goes about leaning a bike into a curve, or what counts as dominating the conversation, and often we will be altogether at a loss as to how to put what we've done into words. Second, but closely related, is a technical point: as a matter of fact, despite our best efforts, we have not been able to provide formal analyses of such skills.

At this point, the theoretical holist will argue that there must be a tacit set of rules, or procedures, lying behind our ability to ride, or converse, and the phenomenological and technical difficulties raised in the previous paragraph only show that the rules in question are unconscious, or very difficult to specify, not that they do not exist. That such rules have not been found, either in consciousness, or in research to date, does not show that they cannot be found. But this leads to two further problems. On the one hand, if one tries to give an analysis in terms of the kind of rules that a person might actually follow,

then the cognitivist will either have to admit a skill for applying these rules, or face an infinite regress. Or, if he says that one doesn't need a rule or skill for applying a rule, one simply does what the rule requires, . . . why not just accept that one simply does what the situation requires, without recourse to rules at all?<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, if the theoretical holist tries to replace everyday rules with formal nonmental rules, of the kind found in computer modeling, the problem arises of specifying the basic elements that the rule would operate on:

A formal rule must be represented as a sequence of operations. But there seem to be no basic movements or ideas to serve as the elements over which such rules would have to operate. Even though bodily skills, for example, are sometimes learned by following rules which dictate a sequence of simple movements, when the performer becomes proficient the simple movements are left behind and a single unified, flexible, purposive pattern of behaviour is all that remains. . . . No one has the slightest idea how to construct formal rules for the skills involved in swimming or speaking a language, let alone the skills embodying our understanding of what being means. It seems that the background of practices does not consist in a belief system, a system of rules, or in formalized procedures; indeed, it seems the background does not consist in representations at all.<sup>27</sup>

A further, related point, is that even if we can give a formal specification of how to proceed, it will be incapable of handling new and different cases, or of showing creativity in responding to unexpected circumstances. Practices are more flexible than beliefs; a real expert faced with an unexpected challenge, a case quite unlike an ordinary or routine one, will be able to respond creatively and imaginatively when a routine response would be inadequate or inappropriate. The ability to respond creatively to a challenging case is a distinctive difference between a human expert and an "expert system." A final, rather different, reason for holding that skills cannot be made explicit is that there are certain social skills, primarily those involved in the maintenance of repressive and oppressive social structures, which would break down if articulated and thematized self-consciously. This is a theme that is prominent in the work of Foucault and Bourdieu, but which receives surprisingly little attention in Dreyfus's work, perhaps because this inexpressibility is always specific to a particular culture, and he is primarily interested in reasons why certain skills cannot be made explicit under any circumstances.

Up to this point, we have primarily considered the negative implications of the claim that practices involve skills, reasons why an attempt to make them fully explicit cannot succeed. This is the principal concern of *What Computers Still Can't Do* and *Mind Over Machine*. But there is also a more positive way of approaching the claim in question: one can take it as an invitation to provide a portrayal of the role of skills in our lives, and this approach is prominent in *Being-in-the-World's* interpretation of disclosure, the fore-structure of

interpretation, and sense. Skillful activity is holistic, connected with other skills and ways of living, and so acquiring skills is a matter of being socialized into a social world.

One of the most important morals that emerges from Dreyfus's Heideggerian work on skillful activity is that it would be a mistake to think of it as a matter of endorsing practice over theory, for background skills, our familiarity with the world, are equally a precondition of both theoretical and practical activity:

[W]henever we are revealing entities by using or contemplating them, we must simultaneously be exercising a general skilled grasp of our circumstances. It is this background orienting that makes everyday coping possible. . . . Our general background coping, our familiarity with the world, what Heidegger calls originary transcendence, turns out to be what Heidegger means by our understanding of being. . . . And Heidegger is explicit that this understanding of being is more basic than either practice or theory:

"In whatever way we conceive of knowing, it is . . . a *comportment toward beings*. . . . But all practical-technical commerce with beings is also a comportment toward beings. . . . In all comportment toward beings—whether it is specifically cognitive, which is most frequently called theoretical, or whether it is practical-technical—an understanding of being is already involved. For a being can be encountered by us *as* a being only in the light of the understanding of being. . . ."28

It is the discovery of the primacy of this understanding of being, not of the primacy of practical activity, that Heidegger rightly holds to be his unique contribution to Western philosophy.<sup>29</sup>

## V Conclusion

Perhaps the most difficult question raised by this account of "our general background coping, our familiarity with the world" is the following: what is the identity of the "we" that is under discussion here? In other words, *whose* practices are we talking about? Does such an approach presuppose a specific community or group as its subject matter? Should the "we" be contrasted with the "we" of other groups, or does it refer quite universally, to any person whatsoever? Is there just one understanding of being, or are there many?

The Heidegger of *Basic Problems* takes it for granted that his subject matter is *the* understanding of being, not *an* understanding of being.

Later, Heidegger was to think of "comportment toward beings" as the understanding shared by the West, or "those cultures that have excelled at the skill of history-making," and it is this approach that Dreyfus, Spinoza, and Flores have taken as their point of departure in *Disclosing New Worlds*.<sup>30</sup>

Because "we *are* the practices,"<sup>31</sup> this question about the nature of the subject of Dreyfus's account, the "we," is at the same time a question about the nature of its object, the practices. This brings us back to the third of Dreyfus's four questions that were posed at the beginning of section III, namely "How do they fit together?"

3. How do the practices fit together? This question raises other questions: How *totalized* are they? Does everything fit together, or only parts? How do you characterize the parts that do fit together, and the aspects that are left out? Do practices, for example, fit together like elements in a formal system, or do they fit together at varying distances from paradigm cases, with overlapping similarities, or are there other models for how they fit together?<sup>32</sup>

Notice that unlike his other three questions, this one leads him to a number of further questions, rather than a definite answer. At the 1997 NEH Institute on Practices, Dreyfus approached the issues surrounding the primacy of practice, and the nature of practices, in a similar way, but looking at different accounts of how practices change over time, rather than their identity at a single time. He began by giving a summary of the conception of skills and background practices that we have surveyed in the last three sections. This led to a discussion of different conceptions of the ways in which skills can change and develop: do they become more specialized and stable, articulating goods that are internal to the practice, or are later developments discontinuous with previous ways of acting? Turning to the question of the ethico-political consequences of beginning with practices, he mapped out five competing views about how practices change over time, and the extent to which practices are unified or dispersed, integrated or disseminatory, and argued that each has substantive ethical and political implications. Briefly, the views he set out can be summed up as follows.<sup>33</sup>

(1) Stability. (Wittgenstein, Bourdieu) The practices are relatively stable and resist change. Change may be initiated by innovators, or

be the result of "drift," but there is no inherent tendency in the practices for this to happen. The consequence is either a conservative acceptance of the status quo or revolutionary prescription of change.

(2) Articulation. (Hegel, Merleau-Ponty) The practices have a telos of clarity and coherence, and become increasingly more refined as our skills develop. This leads to political progressivism and whiggish history, albeit with the recognition that the path to progress will not always lead in that direction.

(3) Appropriative Gathering, Ereignis. (Dreyfus's reading of later Heidegger) When practices run into anomalies, we make an originating leap, drawing on marginal or neighboring practices and so revising our cultural style. This supports those who can best bring about such change within a liberal democratic society, such as entrepreneurs, political associations, charismatic leaders, and culture figures.

(4) Dissemination, Différance. (Derrida) There are many equally appropriate ways of acting, and each new situation calls for a leap in the dark. The consequence is a sensitivity to difference, to loosen the hold of past norms on present and future action, and to become aware of the leaps we make rather than covering them up with whiggish history.

(5) Problematization. (Foucault) Practices develop in such a way that contradictory actions are felt to be appropriate. Attempts to fix these problems lead to further resistance. This leads to a hyperactive pessimism: showing the contingency of what appears to be necessary and engaging in resistance to established order.

This is a rich and suggestive set of connections between theories of practice and ethico-political commitments. However, I would prefer to end on a note of caution. First, it may be a mistake to think that we need to give a single uniform answer to such questions about how practices develop. Isn't a pluralism which acknowledges that some practices aim at ever greater complexity and subtlety, while others break apart into conflicting tendencies, much more plausible? Rather than having to decide between these accounts, it may be that all of them have their own domain of applicability. Second, it is

far from clear that any such account of practices must have determinate ethico-political implications; much depends on the context in which any particular conception of practice is taken up. Heidegger's conception of practice has been taken to support a wide range of very different political agendas, for instance. Even if we can agree to begin with practices, I have my doubts as to whether that will determine where we end up.



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**Heidegger, Coping, and Cognitive Science**

Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus, Volume 2

*edited by Mark A. Wrathall and Jeff Malpas*

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