

## **Merleau-Ponty and the Power to Reckon with the Possible<sup>1</sup>**

[PENULTIMATE DRAFT: Please consult published version for citation purposes.]

The things we do – our actions – can be contrasted with the things that merely happen to us.<sup>2</sup> Orthodox accounts hold that actions are essentially brought about by states of the agent that represent their performance, and can be distinguished from mere happenings on this basis. Dreyfus (2000) puts forward Merleau-Ponty's view of action as an alternative, arguing that his model captures the human capacity for action better than the orthodox accounts, and should be adopted by anyone seeking to understand human action. As a matter of fact, I agree with Dreyfus' claims. However, my purpose in this paper is not primarily to try and convince others of their truth. Instead, my aim is as follows. Dreyfus' interpretation of Merleau-Ponty is problematic. He does not address a capacity that, for Merleau-Ponty, is essentially involved in the human ability to act. Consequently, the account he presents is both incomplete as a reading of Merleau-Ponty, and independently problematic as it cannot adequately explain how conscious deliberation gives rise to action. My aim in this paper is to remedy the situation by presenting the capacity that Dreyfus overlooks.

I will not attempt to defend Merleau-Ponty's model of action here – I

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<sup>2</sup> I will use 'action' to refer to any type of doing, but it should be noted that many theorists use 'action' in a more restricted sense.

will merely provide an interpretation of it. But by presenting it in its complete form, I hope to pave the way for further research into his model as a serious alternative to the orthodox account.

### 'Absorbed coping'

Dreyfus is primarily interested in Merleau-Ponty's account of unreflective behaviour. What counts as unreflective behaviour depends upon how one understands what it is to reflect. In this context, to call an instance of behaviour 'unreflective' is to describe an aspect of one's experience of engaging in it. Behaviour is unreflective in this sense if the subject experiences her behaviour as occurring without the guidance of thought. Examples will help to get the phenomenon in clear view. Someone who drifts absentmindedly into the kitchen and makes a cup of tea whilst thinking about what to eat for lunch behaves unreflectively. Merleau-Ponty gives the example of modifying one's behaviour to suit one's social situation (1962: 106) – I unthinkingly modify my fruity language, e.g., when talking to the Vice Chancellor. The martial artist who is sparring in a Kung Fu competition also behaves unreflectively. Although the activity requires the subject's complete concentration – successful sparring requires that she be fully absorbed in what she is doing – the subject does not experience her behaviour as guided by thought. Indeed, it is well-documented that consciously thinking about what one is doing interferes with one's ability to do it; thought interrupts the 'flow' of the action. Unlike

orthodox accounts which take unreflective behaviour to be initiated and controlled by states of the agent that represent the movements it involves, Merleau-Ponty holds that unreflective behaviour is brought about by the agent's perceptions of her surroundings.

The direct objects of perception, on Merleau-Ponty's account, are things that have a value or meaning for the perceiver in terms of her capacities to interact with them. One's surrounding environment is immediately presented in perception as 'requiring' or 'suggesting' a certain sort of behaviour such that the perceiver is not confronted with things that have merely objective qualities such as size, shape, etc., but with entities that are edible, throwable, kickable, and so on. The behaviour that one perceives one's environment as requiring will be behaviour that relates to one's current task. Consider this example,

For the player in action the football field is not an 'object'... It is pervaded by lines of force (the 'yard' lines; those which demarcate the 'penalty area') and articulated into sectors (for example the 'openings' between the adversaries) which call for a certain mode of action... (Merleau-Ponty 1963: 168).

Here, Merleau-Ponty claims that to the player engaged in a game of football, the pitch is presented as a space, delimited by certain entities, that offers the player opportunities to perform certain actions. The yard lines and those that mark out the penalty area are not perceived

simply as white lines with a particular location in space. They are perceived as real boundaries that mark out areas of the pitch that have significance for the player's behaviour. The spaces between the players on the opposing team are not perceived as simply areas of the pitch where no people are standing but as 'openings', i.e., opportunities to progress towards the goal, or opportunities to pass the ball to another member of one's team. Moreover, it is only when playing football that the agent perceives the pitch like this. If, e.g., she is walking her dog and accidentally wanders onto the pitch during a game, she will not see the ball as to-be-intercepted, but as to-be-avoided.

It is the perceived opportunities for action that initiate and control unreflective behaviour on Merleau-Ponty's account. The agent simply perceives an opportunity to behave, and responds by so behaving, without the need for any intervening states that represent her engagement in the activity. Thus in the above examples, when I drift absentmindedly into the kitchen and make a cup of tea, I perceive the kettle as for-boiling-water, the mug as for-holding-tea, the teabag as for-brewing, and so forth. These perceptions 'pull forth' the act of tea-making from me and guide its execution whilst I think of other things. Similarly, when talking to the Vice Chancellor, I have a perceptual grip on my social situation constituted by a sense of formality that permeates the proceedings, and which immediately regulates my language so that I do not swear. The martial artist likewise

perceives her situation as requiring a certain sort of behaviour. Her opponent's fist is seen as an opportunity to duck, an unguarded chest presented as an opportunity to deliver a kick, etc., and the martial artist simply responds to these perceptions by acting.<sup>3</sup> Dreyfus calls action that is immediately brought about by the agent's perception of her environment 'absorbed coping'.

Merleau-Ponty holds that the capacity for absorbed coping is underpinned by the possession of motor-skills. These are physical abilities, capacities to engage in forms of behaviour or modes of activity. They range from very basic skills, such as scratching one's nose, to more complex skills such as driving a car. Motor-skills are acquired by practice. One has to launch oneself into attempts to do the thing in question, and keep practising until one becomes proficient. Practise is a process of familiarising oneself with the activity in question so that it comes to feel natural. To illustrate these points, consider what it is like to acquire the ability to roller-skate. Clearly, I cannot learn to roller-skate by sitting in a chair and thinking about doing so, I have to launch myself into attempts to roller-skate. When I first put on a pair of roller-skates they feel alien. I am very much aware of the skates being

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<sup>3</sup> Dreyfus talks about the agent having a sense that the current relationship between her body and the environment deviates from some optimal relationship between them. The deviation is experienced as tension, and the agent simply reacts to the tension, moving to reduce it. Although there are certain cases that can be described in this way – e.g., the example Dreyfus supplies of shuffling when entering a lift to as to stand the appropriate distance from each other, the appropriate distance being dictated, of course, by cultural norms (Dreyfus: 2000: 300) – in other cases such as absentminded tea-making, there seems to be nothing describable as a sense of tension that I seek to reduce by putting on the kettle.

strapped to my feet, and I feel encumbered. My feet feel heavy, I am aware of being taller than usual and I feel that I might fall over at any minute. The sensation of being on wheels and the bodily movements required to propel myself along feel strange and awkward. I move tentatively and without confidence. I often fall over. But as I practice, wearing roller-skates starts to feel more natural; I cease to be constantly aware of the skates attached to my feet, and of being taller. I no longer feel that I might fall over at any moment, and I manage to stay upright. The bodily movements needed to move on the skates also start to feel less awkward and I start to move with confidence. The more I skate, the better I become at making minute adjustments to my posture to keep my balance. I start to crouch down and lean forwards slightly when I am skating along. As I move my legs to propel myself forward, I learn to shift my weight just enough to aid propulsion without overbalancing. Through practice, I become familiar with roller-skating so that it feels natural to me. The same is true of other motor-skills. As Merleau-Ponty says, the body has to “‘catch’ the movement” (1962: 142) for one to acquire a motor-skill.<sup>4</sup>

It is very easy to see one way in which motor-skills are implicated in absorbed coping: to execute an action – to perform the bodily movements it involves – the agent must possess the necessary skills. To block an opponent's fist during a Kung Fu fight, e.g., I must be skilled at

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<sup>4</sup> Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1999) offers a nice account of the different stages one passes through in acquiring a skill.

Kung Fu. However, there is a further way in which the possession of motor-skills contributes to absorbed coping. They also play an important role in perception. The objects of perception, for Merleau-Ponty, are things that invite the perceiver to interact with them in various ways. Merleau-Ponty holds that the opportunities for action that one perceives in the world around one are determined both by one's current task, and by what one can do. What a subject can do on any particular occasion depends both on what her environment is like, and her behavioural capacities, i.e., her motor-skills. It follows that on Merleau-Ponty's account, what a subject perceives on any particular occasion will be dependent on her current task, the nature of her environment, and the motor-skills she possesses.

Motor-skills contribute to perception in the following way. A motor-skill cannot be exercised in just any old environment. One cannot, e.g., snowboard, unless one is in a part of the world that contains snow (real or artificial), a slope, and a snowboard. Thus part of what it is to be able to do *x*, is to be able to do *x* in appropriate environments (indeed, no sense can be given to doing *x* in an inappropriate environment – 'snowboarding' whilst lying in bed just isn't snowboarding – although some environments are more appropriate than others). Since engaging in an activity necessarily requires an environment of a particular sort, the ability to engage in that activity, essentially involves the ability to pick out appropriate environments in which to do so. Merleau-Ponty holds that the ability to recognize

certain environments as being appropriate for doing x is constituted by *perceiving* those environments as offering an opportunity to do x. Learning to do x is therefore partly a matter of learning to perceive opportunities to do so. Acquiring the skill of rock-climbing, e.g., partly involves learning to see little cracks and ledges in the rock as hand and footholds. When one starts out, only the bigger ledges and wider cracks will look suitable, but as one gets better at rock-climbing, smaller ledges will be perceived as offering a passage up the rock-face. Thus one will progress from seeing a rock-face as an impassable mass of rock to seeing it as climbable. The better one gets at climbing, the better one will become at perceiving opportunities to do so, and thus different rock-faces will be perceived as more or less difficult to climb. We can see from this analysis that to perceive an opportunity to act is to exercise a motor-skill on Merleau-Ponty's account.

### Dreyfus and intention

Dreyfus' exposition of absorbed coping is illuminating. However, as a model of action, it is incomplete. On Merleau-Ponty's view as it has been expounded so far, the agent's perception of her environment as 'requiring' a certain sort of behaviour, immediately brings about that behaviour without the need for any intervening states that represent the actions she performs. However, there are cases where we want to say that the subject's *thoughts* – rather than her perceptions – bring about her behaviour. The clearest instances are cases where an

episode of practical reasoning leads to action, e.g., I deliberate about my monthly expenditure, decide I can afford to buy a television, form an intention to now go to the shop, which brings about my leaving the house. Merleau-Ponty needs to be able to accommodate this kind of case if his account of action is to be at all plausible.

Given what we know of Merleau-Ponty's account so far, cases like that of the television-buying described above seem to present him with an immediate difficulty. We want to say of the above case, that my action of leaving the house to buy a television is brought about by my intention to do so, which represents me leaving the house to buy a television. However, during the time that I form the intention and carry it out, I also perceive the world. Moreover, my perception of my environment plays some role in the execution of my intention – my action of going to the shop must be guided at least in part by my perceptions of the front door, the road, etc. The problem is that on Merleau-Ponty's account, perception has the power to immediately bring about behaviour, without the need for any states that represent it. But if this is so, then it is unclear what role intention can play in bringing about my behaviour. The relation between perception and action looks too tight; there seems to be no room for intention to intervene. Of course, Merleau-Ponty could simply stipulate that intention can alter the course of behaviour. However, as an explanation of how intention can initiate action, this leaves a lot to be desired, and it would be better if some fuller account could be given.

Dreyfus reads Merleau-Ponty as holding that intention initiates absorbed coping when the flow of behaviour has come to a standstill (2000: 300—1). He does not indicate when absorbed coping might cease, but there seem to be two options here: the flow of coping may stop when the subject is not perceiving, and with no perceptions to bring about behaviour, intention is required to 'kick-start' the process. Alternatively, the flow of absorbed coping may stop because perception is sometimes insufficient to bring about behaviour, and so the agent needs as it were, a nudge from intention, to continue interacting with the world. Both suggestions are problematic. Consider first the idea that intention brings about behaviour when perception ceases. There is an absence of perceptual experience when the subject is unconscious. Perhaps the subject also ceases to perceive when she is asleep. This is, however, controversial, since one still retains some sensitivity to one's surroundings whilst asleep. It is reported that people who live in lighthouses are not roused by the sound of the foghorn although another noise of a similar volume would wake them, and conversely, parents with small babies are immediately wakened by the sound of their children crying, even though they would sleep through a different sound of this volume. Nevertheless, let us accept for the sake of argument that the subject ceases to perceive when she is sleeping. Dreyfus reads Merleau-Ponty as holding that intention can initiate behaviour when the flow of absorbed coping stops. One way in which the flow of coping can cease is when there is an absence of

perceptual experience to bring about behaviour. But if this is right, then the only time that thought can bring about behaviour is whilst the subject is asleep or unconscious. Clearly, this is inadequate as an account of how intention can initiate action.

According to the second suggestion, the flow of behaviour comes to a halt when the subject's perceptions are insufficient to bring about coping. In such cases, the subject still perceives the world, but her perceptions do not call forth any behaviour. When this happens, intention gets the process up and running again by initiating action. The first problem is to explain why perception is sometimes insufficient to bring about behaviour. Nothing in Dreyfus' reading of Merleau-Ponty provides any clue as to why this might be so. Perhaps we can make sense of the idea as follows. Suppose Celia has a hard day at work. She leaves the office, dashes round the supermarket, arrives home and sinks into a chair. One might suppose that Celia's flow of behaviour ceases when she sits down. She continues to perceive the world, but her perceptions no longer call forth any behaviour, and so coping stops. But on Merleau-Ponty's view as it has been expounded so far, this is incorrect. Although one may at first be inclined to think that sitting still involves doing nothing, this is not literally true. When sitting still, the agent's muscles are still working to keep her balance, stop her from falling out of the chair, hold her head upright, and so on. One has to learn how to sit in chairs and although this is a very basic skill, consisting merely of abilities to hold one's body upright and keep

one's balance, being able to sit in a chair is nevertheless a motor-skill. Thus, when an agent is sitting still in a chair, even for a length of time, she is exercising the skill of sitting still in chairs. Notice further, that the agent is exercising the skill in response to her perceived surroundings. An agent, e.g., may sit still in the chair because it feels comfortable. When the chair starts to feel uncomfortable, the agent moves in response. Thus when Celia sits in the chair, there is still some low-level coping going on – the flow of her behaviour has not come to a complete standstill. The second, far more significant problem is that, even if we could make sense of the idea that the flow of absorbed coping sometimes grinds to a halt because perception is sometimes insufficient to generate behaviour, this would still leave us with an unsatisfactory account of how intention can bring about action. It would mean that practical reasoning could only generate action on those occasions when perception was insufficient to bring about behaviour. To act on the basis of some practical reasoning, the subject would thus have to wait until her perceptions stopped calling forth coping. But this is extremely counterintuitive; we want to say that the subject can decide to act and then do so. It follows that the account of action that Dreyfus attributes to Merleau-Ponty cannot adequately explain how intentions bring about behaviour.

Action generated by thought

One may accept that Dreyfus' account of how thought can generate action on Merleau-Ponty's model should be rejected. However, one might suppose that there is no problem with explaining how intentions can bring about behaviour given the analysis of absorbed coping presented above. As we have seen, unreflective behaviour is brought about by perceptual experience. The content of perceptual experience is determined by the agent's current project, in combination with her environment and the motor-skills she possesses – the agent perceives her surroundings in the light of her current task, and so perceives opportunities to exercise those of her skills that are relevant to her current project. The proficient driver, e.g., perceives a space-to-park because she can drive, is facing a space suitable for parking, and is engaged in the project of parking her car. Humans can *decide* to take on projects, and deciding to do x involves forming an intention to do x. I take on the task of playing football, e.g., through deciding, or forming an intention to play football. Since one's current task affects the course of absorbed coping and one takes on one's current task by forming an intention to do so, it appears that the account of unreflective behaviour given above already explains how intention can generate action.

Although there is something right about this thought, there is more to Merleau-Ponty's account of how intentions can generate action than this. First, Merleau-Ponty can tell us more about what is involved in taking on a task. One might wonder what more there is to

know about this matter. But consider the following. It was assumed above that one takes on the task of doing *x* in virtue of forming an intention to do *x*, however, this is not always so. Physical creatures have instincts to satisfy hunger, to avoid danger, to mate, to rest, and so forth. These instincts impose certain tasks upon the creature that possesses them. If a simple creature feels hungry, e.g., the feeling of hunger imposes the task of procuring food. The creature does not need to form an intention to take on the task of satisfying hunger; it simply takes on the task in virtue of feeling hungry. Notice next that a creature can go from one task to the next without ever making any decisions. At any time, it is engaged in some task or other. Once that project is complete, another task is imposed by the creature's physical nature – e.g., once it has completed the task of procuring and eating food, its hunger is satiated and it feels sleepy, and thus becomes involved in the project of resting. Human beings are physical creatures possessing instincts to satisfy hunger, to mate, to avoid danger, and so forth. Thus humans could go through life simply engaged in the tasks imposed by these instincts. Given that humans do have certain projects imposed upon them by the fact that they are physical beings, yet can also take on tasks in virtue of forming intentions to do so, one might wonder what opens up the possibility of a human *deciding* to do *x*, rather than simply finding food when hungry, resting when tired, and so on.

Second, although we have identified one way in which intention can bring about action – a subject's intention to engage in the project of doing  $x$  affects her perceptual experience and thus affects her behaviour – this does not account for all of the ways in which thought can guide action. To see this, consider the following case. Juan is a martial artist and film director. He is shooting a film starring himself. One scene depicts him fighting an alien adversary. After experimenting with various ways of shooting the film, Juan decides that the best effect will be achieved if the alien foe is computer-generated. Thus Juan has to mime fighting the alien foe who will be superimposed on the film later. In this case, Juan's action of miming a fight is initiated by his intention to do so. However, it is problematic to suppose that his intention to mime the fight brings about his behaviour by shaping his perceptual experience, so that he perceives opportunities to exercise those skills that are relevant to his project. The problem is that it appears the skill Juan exercises when he mimes the fight is his skill of fighting a real opponent. It is because he knows how to block a real punch, deliver a kick to the stomach of a real person, and so on, that he can mime these actions. The sort of worldly setting that is appropriate for exercising this skill is thus one where there is a real opponent – a person who is attacking the agent and against whom he has to defend himself. It is a setting of this sort that will be perceived as offering an opportunity to exercise the skill of fighting. A setting that does not contain a real opponent will not be perceived as offering an

opportunity to exercise this skill. When Juan mimes fighting the alien, there is no real opponent, and so it cannot be the case that his intention to mime fighting an alien brings about this action in virtue of leading him to perceive an opportunity to exercise his skill at fighting. Some alternative analysis of this case is required.

The key to understanding Merleau-Ponty's account of how thought can generate action lies with his claim that the normal human agent has the power "to reckon with the possible" (1962: 109). To get to grips with what it is "to reckon with the possible", we need a contrasting notion of "the actual". Merleau-Ponty's account of unreflective behaviour yields such a notion. It is the agent's *actual* environment and the project in which she is *actually* engaged – together with her motor-skills – that shape the content of her perceptions, which initiate and control absorbed coping. In absorbed coping there is thus a sense in which the agent contends or reckons with "the actual": her actual environment and actual task. Correlatively, "the possible" with which the normal person has the power to reckon can be understood as encompassing possible projects that the agent could undertake, and/or possible environments in which she could be located.

Further examination of what it is to reckon with one's actual environment and task on Merleau-Ponty's account will enable us to understand what it is to contend with a possible task and/or environment on his view. Notice first that on Merleau-Ponty's view, to

perceive is itself to exercise one's motor-skills. An agent who possesses a motor-skill is able to perform the bodily movements required to engage in some activity, and to recognise environments that are suitable for doing so. The recognition of places as suitable for doing x is constituted by the perception of those places as inviting one to do x. It follows that when the subject perceives the world as inviting her to act in various ways, she is exercising her motor-skills. The content of perceptual experience is not, of course, just determined by the motor-skills the subject possesses; it is also shaped by her environment and current task. Merleau-Ponty holds that the subject's surroundings and current task bring relevant motor-skills 'online' making them available for the subject to use in perception and action; the subject accesses her motor-skills via her actual environment in combination with her current task. The presence of a rock-face and the project of climbing it, e.g., make the climber's ability to rock-climb available to her so that she can both perceive the rock-face as climbable and actually climb it. Since contending with "the actual" involves accessing motor-skills that are relevant to one's actual environment and current task, it follows that the power to reckon with "the possible" should be understood as the power to access – and so use – motor-skills that are relevant to merely possible tasks and environments.

One thing the power to reckon with the possible enables the agent to do is perceive more opportunities for action than just those that relate to her current project. It has so far been claimed that the

content of perceptual experience is determined by the subject's environment, her motor-skills, and her current task. However, this analysis does not yet accurately describe the perceptual experience of a normally functioning adult human. We can demonstrate this by comparing it with the pathological perceptual experience of Schneider, a man who sustained a brain injury during World War I. One of the many strange aspects of Schneider's case is that he never recognises the house of Goldstein (one of the psychologists who worked extensively with him) when he walks past it unless he sets out with the intention of going there (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 134—5). His case stands in stark contrast to the experience of a normal human agent who will recognise a house that she knows, even if she is engaged in a project that does not involve going to it. Merleau-Ponty analyses this as follows. To recognise something is to perceive it as familiar. Things appear familiar when one knows how to interact with them. Thus to perceive something as familiar is to perceive it as something for which a particular form of behaviour is appropriate. As we have seen, to perceive something as offering an opportunity to engage in a particular form of behaviour is to exercise a motor-skill. It follows that to recognise something on Merleau-Ponty's account is to exercise a motor-skill, or set of motor-skills.

What Schneider cannot do is exercise those motor-skills that *could* be used to interact with Goldstein's house, unless he is *actually* engaged in some project which involves interacting with it, e.g.,

posting a letter through the door, visiting Goldstein, delivering a parcel to the house, etc. The only motor-skills he can use at any time to perceive and act are those that are relevant to his actual environment and current task, and so he only perceives those opportunities for action that relate to these. In contrast, a normal adult human would recognise the house, even if she is merely passing it on her way to somewhere else. Thus we can see that normal adult humans have access to more than just those motor-skills that are made available by their actual environments and current tasks. To recognise Goldstein's house is to perceive an opportunity for action relative to the task of 'engaging' with the house in some way. So to recognise it when you pass it on the way to somewhere else is to see the house in the light of a potential task. It is to perceive the house as offering an opportunity to act in relation to the possible task of, e.g., posting a letter through Goldstein's door. Thus the normal adult human can access more than just those motor-skills that are made available by her actual environment and current task; she can also access motor-skills that are relevant to merely possible projects she could undertake in her environment. The opportunities for action that correlate with her current task will be perceived as most urgent – and will therefore initiate action – but she will also perceive less urgent demands for action – those that relate to merely potential tasks.

We are now in a position to explain how, on Merleau-Ponty's account, the human agent is able to *decide* to take on a project,

rather than simply having tasks imposed upon her by her physical nature. This is made possible by the ability to perceive more than just those opportunities for action that relate to one's current task. On Merleau-Ponty's view, an appreciation of the possibilities open to one is required for decision-making. The agent has to appreciate that she could be doing something other than what she is currently doing. She has to appreciate that she has taken one of two or more options, and she has to have a sense that the options in question are real possibilities – things she feels she could really do, rather than mere logical possibilities. The agent's appreciation of the live possibilities open to her gives her a sense of choice, and once the agent has a sense of choice, there is scope for the making of decisions. Merleau-Ponty claims that it is the power to reckon with the possible that furnishes humans with an appreciation of the options open to them. As we have seen, the power to reckon with the possible enables the agent to perceive more opportunities for action than just those that are relevant to the completion of her current task. Since the perception of an opportunity to behave in a particular way is the exercise of a motor-skill that the agent possesses, she has the ability to engage in the behaviour that she perceives the world as demanding, so the perceived opportunity for action is presented as a real possibility for her, something that she can do. In this way, the power to reckon with the possible enables humans to *decide* to take on particular projects,

rather than simply having tasks imposed upon them by their physical nature.

We are interested in Merleau-Ponty's account of how thought can generate action. An intention to do *x* can affect the agent's behaviour by shaping the agent's perceptions of her environment which in turn initiate and control her actions. However, as we saw above, there are cases where intention generates action but which cannot be explained along these lines, such as that of Juan. Juan mimes a fight with an alien foe; his behaviour is generated by an intention. It seems that the skill Juan exercises when he mimes the fight is his skill at fighting a real opponent. But since in this case there is no real opponent, Juan's exercise of his fighting skill cannot be initiated and guided by his perception of an opportunity to exercise this skill. Consequently, his intention to mime a fight with an alien adversary cannot be understood as bringing about his behaviour in virtue of shaping his perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty explains cases like this one by again appealing to the human ability to access one's motor-skills in relation to merely possible tasks and environments. In short, Juan 'interacts' with an imaginary opponent. He can thus be understood as acting with respect to merely possible surroundings, rather than with respect to his actual environment. Since his act of miming a fight with an alien foe involves exercising his skill at fighting, to mime the fight, Juan must be able to access his martial arts skills with

respect to his imagined environment, which contains an alien opponent.

Merleau-Ponty's analysis of cases where the agent acts with respect to a merely possible environment has the same form as his account of absorbed coping. It follows that to understand how action is brought about in these cases, we need to re-describe his account of absorbed coping in more general terms. Merleau-Ponty gives a very general statement of his account of human behaviour in the following passage:

[F]or the normal person every [F]movement has a *background*, and the movement and its background are 'moments of a unique totality'. The background to the movement is not a representation associated or linked externally with the movement itself, but is immanent in the movement inspiring and sustaining it at every moment (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 110).

To uncover what he means here, let us consider the above passage with respect to unreflective behaviour. In absorbed coping, the agent perceives opportunities to act, which initiate and control her actions. What a subject perceives depends on what she can do. Her perception of her environment is also shaped by her current task or project, such that the most urgent demands for action are those that relate to what she is currently doing. It follows that one perceives one's

surroundings primarily as a setting or backdrop for a particular sort of behaviour – activity that relates to one's current task. When playing football, e.g., the agent perceives the goal lines as real boundaries, members of the opposing team as adversaries to be avoided, spaces between them as opportunities to progress towards goal, and so on. The player perceives ways to interact with the world that are relevant to her task of playing football, and so she perceives her environment primarily as a setting for this project. It is the agent's immediate environment, perceived as a setting for her current behaviour that is the 'background' to action in cases of absorbed coping. When Merleau-Ponty talks about the movement and its background as being 'moments of a totality', he is referring to the way in which there is an intimate correspondence between the behaviour, and the subject's environment perceived as a setting for it. The claim that the background to the behaviour is what 'inspires and sustains' it simply refers to the way in which the agent's unreflective behaviour is brought about and controlled by her perception of her environment as 'requiring' the behaviour in question.

The background to unreflective behaviour is the subject's environment, perceived as a setting for that behaviour. We have seen above that to perceive, on Merleau-Ponty's account, is to exercise one's motor-skills. An essential part of being able to do x is the ability to recognise worldly settings that are appropriate for doing x, which is constituted by the capacity to perceive those settings as offering

opportunities to do x. Perception on this account is an activity of the perceiver. When the agent perceives a demand for action, she is not passively receiving data from the world. Rather, she actively 'summons' the invitations to behave from the world; she 'projects' a situation around herself (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 136); she invests her environment with a bodily significance. In perception, the projection of a situation around oneself that calls for a particular kind of behaviour is constrained by the nature of one's environment. When I perceive a space-to-park, e.g., providing that nothing goes wrong with the perceptual process, my 'summoning up' of this demand for action is in line with what my environment is really like – I am confronted with a space that is indeed suitable for parking, and the fact that it is suitable for parking guides my summoning up of the invitation to park there.

Just as unreflective behaviour is initiated and controlled by its background, which is brought into being by the subject's ability to summon up demands for action from her environment, so too, behaviour such as that of Juan takes place against a background, which inspires and sustains it, and is again constituted by the subject's capacity to project a situation around herself that calls for a certain kind of activity. Merleau-Ponty holds that in a case such as that of Juan, where the agent 'interacts' with merely imagined surroundings, the agent represents those surroundings in thought. The agent then summons up the demands for action that this environment would make if it were real. Since the environment is not real, the demands for

action that are summoned by the subject will not be perceived. Instead, they should be understood as imbuing his representation of the environment with a bodily significance. The representation thus exerts a pull on the subject; it demands a certain kind of activity, in a way that is analogous to, but not the same as, the manner in which the subject *perceives* his environment as demanding action. The representation, imbued with bodily significance, thus functions as the background to the action, pulling forth the agent's actions from him, and guiding his behaviour. The capacity to summon up demands for action from one's environment is conferred upon one by one's motor-skills. When the agent perceives a rock-face as offering an opportunity to rock-climb, i.e., when she summons up an invitation to climb from the rock-face, she is exercising her skill at climbing. Likewise, when the subject summons up demands for action with respect to an environment that is represented in thought, she is exercising her motor-skills. Thus it can be seen that the agent is able to imbue a possible, or imagined environment that she represents in thought with bodily significance because she is able to access her motor-skills in relation to that represented environment – she is able to access those skills that she could use to perceive and act with respect to that environment if it were real.

Cases such as that of Juan are fairly unusual – miming is not a particularly commonplace activity. However, having analysed this case, we can see how the capacity involved is implicated in other

cases that are more widespread. In the above case, the demands for action to which the agent responds by acting are not summoned up in line with the nature of the agent's environment. Instead, the agent summons up the demands with respect to a representation. Thus the agent does not perceive the demands for action; they imbue his representation with a bodily significance. Merleau-Ponty suggests that a similar analysis should be given of various other cases. It will further our understanding of how thought can generate action on Merleau-Ponty's account to consider another example: acting on the basis of a moral judgement (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 112). Suppose, e.g., that I see some children kicking a hedgehog. It is the first time that I have been faced with such a situation. I judge that the morally correct thing to do would be to rescue the hedgehog, and on this basis, I take the hedgehog away to safety. In this case, my moral judgement – a thought which represents what I take to be the morally correct course of action – generates my action of rescuing the hedgehog. Although in this case the entity with which I interact – the hedgehog – is real rather than imagined, Merleau-Ponty nevertheless holds that the case involves the power to reckon with a possible environment and should be analysed in an analogous way to the case of Juan. Motor-skills are acquired through practice. Since it is one's motor-skills that enable one to perceive a demand for action, it follows that to perceive one's surroundings as demanding a certain form of behaviour, one must have behaved in that way in environments of the same kind, a

sufficient number of times before. I have never before been faced with children kicking a hedgehog. Therefore I do not perceive the situation as requiring hedgehog-rescuing behaviour. The moral requirement to rescue the hedgehog is only represented in thought; I represent my surroundings as requiring hedgehog-rescuing behaviour. Through the power to reckon with the possible, I access those of my motor-skills that are relevant to the way in which I represent my surroundings, and thus imbue my moral judgement with a bodily significance in the same way that Juan's imagined surroundings are imbued with bodily significance. My moral judgement, imbued with bodily significance, then functions as the background to the action, drawing forth my hedgehog-rescuing behaviour from me. Again, we can see how the power to reckon with the possible enables the agent to act on the basis of thought.

### Conclusion

Dreyfus offers a reading of Merleau-Ponty's account of action according to which unreflective behaviour is immediately initiated and controlled by the agent's perceptions. The agent perceives opportunities to act, which draw forth her actions from her without the need for any intervening states that represent their performance. Dreyfus' interpretation runs into difficulties, however, when it comes to explaining how thought can generate action on Merleau-Ponty's model. He suggests that intention can initiate action when the flow of

unreflective behaviour ceases. I have argued that this leaves us with an unsatisfactory account of how thought can generate action since it means either thought can only generate action when the subject is asleep/unconscious, or the subject must wait for her perceptions to stop controlling behaviour before she can act on the basis of her decisions.

Dreyfus encounters problems when trying to explain how thought can bring about action on Merleau-Ponty's model because he does not address a capacity that Merleau-Ponty calls the power to reckon with the possible, and which he takes to be essential to the human ability to act. The content of perceptual experience on Merleau-Ponty's account is determined by the agent's actual environment, her current task, and her motor-skills. Merleau-Ponty conceives of this as the agent's actual environment and current task making certain of her motor-skills available for her to use to perceive and act. I have suggested that the power to reckon with the possible should be understood as the capacity to access motor-skills over and above those that are made available by one's actual environment and current task – the normal human agent can access motor-skills in relation to merely possible environments and potential tasks. Thought affects behaviour in that humans can decide to take on tasks which then help shape the perceptions that bring about behaviour. However, a creature's physical nature imposes tasks upon it, and so one might wonder what makes it possible for humans to decide to

engage in a project. On Merleau-Ponty's account this is explained by the power to reckon with the possible. One thing this power enables its possessor to do is see her current environment in the light of tasks in which she could be engaged. In other words, she can see more possibilities for action than just those that relate to her current project. He holds that this opens up the possibility of choice and so humans can choose to take on tasks rather than simply having tasks imposed by their physical nature. However, there are some cases where we want to say that thought brings about behaviour, but which cannot be understood as cases where the agent's decision to take on a task affects the content of her perceptions. It is again the power to reckon with the possible that explains how action occurs in these cases – the power to access motor-skills in relation to merely possible environments. To perceive, on Merleau-Ponty's account, is to exercise one's motor-skills. The subject summons up demands for action, so projecting a situation around herself that calls for a certain form of behaviour. In perception, this process is constrained by the nature of the things the subject perceives. The power to reckon with the possible enables the agent to summon up demands for action independently of her environment. She is thus able to summon up demands for action in line with an environment that is merely represented in thought, thus imbuing the representation with a bodily significance, which can then initiate and guide action.

It has not been my aim in this paper to defend Merleau-Ponty's account of action, and there is much work yet to be done. However, I hope that I have shown that Merleau-Ponty's model does have the resources to explain how thought can bring about action, and is thus worthy of further investigation as an alternative to the orthodox view.

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