

Contributi/6

The Role of Habits in the Question of the Relationship between Perception and Concepts

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This paper aims to offer a renovated reading of the role of habits within the epistemological question of the relationship between perception and conceptuality. Focusing on the Dreyfus-McDowell *Debate*, the paper proposes to conceive habits not as subjective modalities of experience, but rather as a *paradigmatic notion* for comprehending the intimate relationship between the allegedly separated spheres of perception and concepts. Hence, I will highlight how McDowell and Dreyfus employ the notion of habit, pinpointing that both authors think of habits as modalities *de re*, namely as subjective attitudes of living in our world. Referring to Classic phenomenology, in which habits represent a complex phenomenon, I will suggest reading the ambiguous nature of habits not as an aporia to resolve but to exploit. Instead of questioning if habits are conceptual or not, the paper suggests considering habits as a *paradigmatic* dimension of experience from which to start analysing the interconnection between concepts and perception.

Introduction

This paper intends to investigate the role of habits within the so-called Dreyfus-McDowell *Debate* which tackles the relationship between concepts and perceptions. It aims to show that habits are a crucial notion for the *Debate*, and yet are only partially analysed and their potential remains underexploited. After considering the *Debate* and briefly glimpsing at the Classic phenomenology of habits, I shall argue for an alternative reading of the role of habits. Their ambiguous nature and complex dynamics can serve us as a *paradigm* for rethinking the interconnection between the sphere of conceptual content and worldly perception.

The notion of habit has frequently appeared in philosophical tradition as one of the most crucial phenomena of our experience. However, even if the domain of habits is central for understanding how we interact with the world and society, philosophical debates have reserved an ambiguous role for it. Part

of the difficulty in ascribing to habits a precise function is probably due to their enigmatic nature: they represent an obvious aspect of our everyday life and do not particularly attract our attention or raise any special philosophical wonder⁴⁶. Nonetheless, for this very reason, they are hard to penetrate. Whilst being a basic structure of our ordinary life, the concepts of habit conceal a rich and variegated nature and represent a complex, oxymoronic, ubiquitous and paradoxical phenomenon⁴⁷. In addition to this, the slipperiness in defining habits is also due to the fact that the notion embraces a variety of meanings: it indicates motor reflexes, practical gestures, or routines, as well as cultural attitudes and rituals.

Given their ambiguous nature, it is worth spending a few more words on the role of habits. Many authors have included habits in their works and philosophical systems, from Ancient Greek philosophy to modern epistemology, like Aristotle, Hume, American Pragmatists, and continental phenomenologists⁴⁸. We can state that, as a matter of fact, the analysis of behavioural gestures, schemas and ritual habits do play a fundamental role in philosophy. Nevertheless, we can register that the overall philosophical tendency posits what belongs to the domain of habits, while acknowledging their relevance, in the background or ascribes to it a secondary place. Traditionally, the notion of habit – given the dominant Aristotelian inspiration and Kantian ascendancy – is more considered within ethics and moral philosophy; while it has been mainly exploited in the analysis of practical activity, finds instead less space in epistemology or metaphysics. Habits have generally received minor attention compared to the core issues of metaphysics, which has been primarily concerned with the problem of truth, reality, subjectivity and so forth.

However, we should note that in recent times studies on habits have flourished throughout the field of philosophy, encompassing both classical and new disciplines⁴⁹. Notwithstanding a general acknowledgement regarding the importance of the question of habits, some scholars have been lamenting that contemporary debates in both moral and theoretical/analytic philosophy are still

⁴⁶ C. Carlisle, *On Habit (Thinking in Action)*, Abingdon 2014; S. Matthews, *The Significance of Habit*, «Journal of Moral Philosophy», 2017, pp. 1-22, p. 2.

⁴⁷ C. Carlisle, *On Habit*, cit., p. 141.

⁴⁸ We can recall Aristotle's notion of *hexis* and *ethos* that we find eminently in *Nicomachean Ethics*, but also in *Metaphysics* and *Categories*; Hume's notions of 'habit' and 'customs' in *Essay concerning Human Understanding* and *A Treatise of Human Nature*, James's notion of 'habit' in *Psychology: Briefer Course*; Husserl and Heidegger's notions of *Gewohnheit*, *Habitualität*, *praxis* or *Zuhandenheit*, in late Husserl, especially *Experience and Judgment*, and early Heidegger, especially *Being and Time*.

⁴⁹ Recently, Marco Piazza has offered a historical reconstruction of the role of habits within the history of Western philosophy. M. Piazza, *Creature dell'abitudine. Abito, costume, seconda natura da Aristotele alle scienze cognitive*, Bologna 2018. Scholars from different areas of philosophy have collected their contributions in M. Piazza (ed.), *Habit, Second Nature, and Disposition*, «Paradigmi», 2020. We can also appreciate that new disciplines such as neuroscience are addressing the issue mainly by looking at the phenomenological and pragmatist tradition. See, for example, F. Caruana, A. Borghi, *Il cervello in azione*, Bologna 2016.

not considering this issue with adequate attention⁵⁰. This is probably because scholars, even though habits are now increasingly gaining space as key notions not only for ethics but also for the philosophy of action, philosophy of mind and metaphysics, still think that this topic is struggling to assume the role it deserves⁵¹.

In this paper, I will narrow the focus on the field of philosophy of mind, and I will tackle a recent debate in which habits have re-emerged as a pivot of discussion. I will refer to the debate between John McDowell and Hubert Dreyfus (the so-called McDowell-Dreyfus *Debate*), which has been questioning the relationship between concepts and perceptions and has engaged a high number of scholars from different areas of philosophy⁵². Although Dreyfus and McDowell offer diametrically opposed views on the topic of the dynamics between conceptual and perceptual capacities, they do converge on many things, especially about their methodological strategies. One of these is the reference to the dimension of habits that they use to disentangle the question at stake, discuss and sustain their theses. In this paper,

1) I will outline the opposite theses proposed by McDowell and Dreyfus and their understanding of habits.

2) I shall show how in both authors, habits are conceived of as modalities *de re*, as they are employed for describing, although under two different lights, subjective attitudes of living in the world.

3) I will then suggest a new understanding of the role of habits, emphasising their importance for the understanding of the interconnection of conceptual content and the world. I shall argue that both authors do not fully exploit the potential of the concept of habits and the complexity of their structure, by briefly turning to Classic phenomenology, one of Dreyfus' main references. As we will see, McDowell's and Dreyfus' discussion reaches a stalemate on the question of whether concepts encompass our perceptions and receptivity. My suggestion is to undertake a diverse path in order to comprehend the connection

⁵⁰ S. Matthews, *The Significance of Habit*, cit., pp. 1-22. See also, G. R. Peterson, J. van Slyke, M. Spezio, and K. Reimer, *Habits in Mind. Integrating Theology, Philosophy, and the Cognitive Science of Virtue, Emotion, and Character Formation*, Boston 2017, which focuses on the notion and role of habits, claiming that the latter has received only modest attention among contemporary scholars of philosophy, psychology, and religion.

⁵¹ See for example, B. Pollard, *Actions, Habits and Constitution*, «Ratio», 19, 2006, pp. 229-248, or also D. Moran, *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology of Habituality and Habitus*, «Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology», 42, 2011, pp. 53-77.

⁵² The main references of the debate between McDowell and Dreyfus are: J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Harvard 1994; H. Dreyfus, *Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise*, «Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association» 79, 2005, pp. 47-65; H. Dreyfus, *Response to McDowell*, «Inquiry», 2007, pp. 371-377; H. Dreyfus, *The Return of the Myth of the Mental*, «Inquiry», 2007, pp. 352-365; H. Dreyfus, *The Myth of the Pervasiveness of the Mental*, J. Schear, (ed.), *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*, Abingdon 2013, pp. 15-40. J. McDowell, *Response to Dreyfus*, «Inquiry», 2007, pp. 366-370; J. McDowell, *What Myth?*, «Inquiry», 2007, pp. 338-351; J. McDowell, *The Myth of the Mind as Detached*, J. Schear, *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World*, cit., pp. 41-58.

of these two spheres by analysing the ambiguous character proper of habits. In this perspective, habits are not thought of as practical properties of a subject nor their obscure nature represents an obstacle. On the contrary, the aporetic nature of habits may be thought of as the *paradigmatic* notion to understand how and to what extent conceptuality and perception relate in our experience.

1. The Dreyfus-McDowell Debate

In his book, *Mind and World*, McDowell diagnoses that philosophy constantly oscillates between two tendencies: what he calls 'bald naturalism' or, quoting Sellars, the 'Myth of the Given'⁵³ – that is, the idea that pure sense experience serves as the ultimate epistemic foundation for the whole of empirical knowledge and science – and coherentism/idealism, which risks irremediably divaricating intellect from reality or reducing the latter to the former⁵⁴. To solve these tensions, McDowell rediscovers Kant and his motto: «thoughts without content are empty, intuition without concepts are blind». In this sentence, McDowell glimpses the interconnection between concepts and intuitions and finds the philosophical hint for his thesis⁵⁵. Thus, the core claim of *Mind and World* is that conceptual activities are already operative in and permeate perception⁵⁶. In his works, McDowell spends his energies on finding a philosophical synthesis and stressing the interconnection between concepts and perceptions, or in other words, between mind and world⁵⁷ by a) emphasising,

⁵³ W. Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, H. Feigl and M. Scriven (eds.), *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World*, Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol 1, 1956, pp. 253-329.

⁵⁴ J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 24.

⁵⁵ «The original Kantian thought was that empirical knowledge results from a co-operation between receptivity and spontaneity. (Here 'spontaneity' can be simply a label for the involvement of conceptual capacities)». J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 9.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

⁵⁷ In *Mind and World*, we find two issues at stake: the relationship between mind and world and that between intellect and perception. We may see how McDowell interlaces the ontological and the epistemological sides of his perspective. McDowell's conception of experience as 'a tribunal, mediating the way our thinking is answerable to how things are' assumes a direct contact with reality. From this perspective, McDowell claims to support a 'minimal empiricism' which goes along with a 'direct realism' that refuses to understand experience as a «medium between subject and external reality» or also a 'conceptual realism' which «indicates that – although reality is mind-independent, this is not outer the sphere of thinkable» [my translation]. M. Caponetto, *Il posto della ragione nella natura. La possibilità di un realismo non riduzionistico nel pensiero di John McDowell*, «Annali della Facoltà di Scienze della Formazione Università degli Studi di Catania», 2005, pp. 177-230, p. 189. Hence, McDowell's ontological stance directly opens to the epistemological one, that is, McDowell's so-called 'minimal empiricism', which aims to overcome bald empiricism and idealism. See, D. Della Rosa, *Idealismo e realismo nell'epistemologia di John McDowell*, L. Corti, G. Miolli (eds.), *Hegel e McDowell. esperienza, verità, normatività*, «Verifiche», 2017, pp. 117-138, p. 133. To testify the intertwined connection between ontology and epistemology in *Mind and World*, Gaskin tells us that, «McDowell corrects and expands this conception, so that in his hands empiricism becomes a doctrine about the possibility of content». R. Gaskin, *Experience and the World's Own Language: A Critique of*

with blunt statements such as perception «is conceptual all the way out»⁵⁸, how we find ourselves always already engaged with the world in conceptual activities and how we should avoid thinking of the separation between an outer boundary around the conceptual dimension; b) searching for an alternative conception of mindedness that might better fit the interlaced dynamics sustained in his claims without falling into idealism or empiricism⁵⁹.

McDowell's insightful but highly controversial theses have found their main discussant in Dreyfus's criticism. From his first comment on the issue, Dreyfus neatly and harshly refuses McDowell's idea that perception is conceptual all the way out⁶⁰. For Dreyfus, this is the clue of McDowell's idealism that excludes the nonconceptual ground of experience and falls prey to the oscillation that he himself denounces. Dreyfus accuses McDowell of deleting the nonconceptual ground of experience which, for Dreyfus, corresponds to the practical dimension, intended as «non-mental, non-conceptual, non-propositional, non-rational and non-linguistic»⁶¹.

In Dreyfus' perspective, our experience in the world is primarily characterized by our immersion in the world conceived in terms of 'absorbed coping'⁶². In this attitude, we live through bodily movements and thanks to bodily skills in which there are no conceptual performances. Dreyfus holds that McDowell does not respect the difference between the practical embodied domain and the 'upper floor' of rationality, but he rather subsumes the non-intellectual sphere into the conceptual one and dismisses the situation-dependent character of practical skills in favour of a world-independent mindedness⁶³. Hence, Dreyfus accuses McDowell of re-proposing a new account of Descartes' dualism and mindedness, pushing too far his need for avoiding the Myth of the Given and embracing, instead, the 'Myth of the Mental'⁶⁴, or better, as Dreyfus later renamed it, the 'Myth of the Pervasiveness of the Mental'⁶⁵. On the other hand, McDowell, while defending himself from this charge, accuses Dreyfus of referring only to one kind of mindedness and labels Dreyfus' criticism as the

John McDowell's Empiricism, Oxford 2006, p. 2. Or else, as McDowell himself puts it: «[T] here is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case (...), there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world». J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 27.

⁵⁸ J. McDowell, *What Myths?*, cit., p. 338.

⁵⁹ I shall add a terminological remark. In *Mind and World*, the Kantian notions of spontaneity and intuition correspond to the notions of concepts/conceptual content and perception, the epistemology dichotomy that McDowell attempts to reconcile as he tries to fill the gap between mind and world or rationality and nature. Schematically speaking, these pair of terms all express the distinction between what tradition has also named as the 'inner' or subjective sphere and the 'outer' or objective sphere.

⁶⁰ H. Dreyfus, *Overcoming the Myth of the Mental*, cit., p. 47.

⁶¹ H. Dreyfus, *The Return of the Mental*, cit., p. 352.

⁶² H. Dreyfus, *Overcoming the Myth of the Mental*, cit., p. 61.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*; H. Dreyfus, *Response to McDowell*, cit., p. 376.

⁶⁵ H. Dreyfus, *The Myth of the Pervasiveness of the Mental*, cit.

‘Myth of the Mind as Detached’⁶⁶, stating that «mindedness does not always involve detachment»⁶⁷. Moreover, I think rightfully, McDowell stresses that Dreyfus, not only comprehends mindedness in a strong sense⁶⁸, but, while refusing the Cartesian model, he subscribes to another kind of dualism when he divides the ‘ground floor’ (of practices) from the ‘upper floors’ of concepts.

In this exchange of replies, which has been named ‘A Battle of Myths’⁶⁹, McDowell and Dreyfus appeal to the dimension of habits to sustain their positions. However, although habits are indeed central for both authors and play a key role in understanding whether perceptions or practices are conceptual, at the same time, they remain underexploited in their potential. In the next section, I shall specify how in the *Debate*, by referring to different philosophical traditions, habits appear in a double acceptance.

2. Habits as Second Nature and Skills

2.1. McDowell on *phronesis* and second nature

Before delving into the analysis of Dreyfus and McDowell’s discussion of habits, I would like to point out that the very notion of ‘habit’ as such is not frequently and thoroughly analysed as one should expect. This may seem odd to say if we consider that both Dreyfus and McDowell are sons of American Pragmatism and neo-Pragmatism, which have eminently recognized the role of habits and practices within their philosophy. Dreyfus’ reflection intersects Classic continental phenomenology and pragmatism (especially John Dewey and Richard Rorty). McDowell belongs to the Pittsburgh School, which rediscovers Kantian and Hegelian Philosophy but also Greek Philosophy, putting them in dialogue with the American analytical movement. As we have already said, McDowell aims at framing a kind of rationality able to account for the intertwined relationship between mind and world in which neither the *ego* nor sensorial impingement reduces the other. To find a solution and overcome these two options, McDowell refers to Aristotle and his notion of *hexis*, *phronesis*, and ‘second nature’. Going back to Ancient Greek philosophy represents a way to get rid of that dualism, subjectivism and idealism that have been usually thought of as fruits of the modern epistemology from Descartes onward. Dreyfus, instead, relies on his phenomenological background and especially on his interpretation of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, where he finds the precursors of the idea of ‘absorbed coping’⁷⁰. Even if taking two different paths, Aristotle and phenomenology give McDowell and Dreyfus the tools to move from the pure

⁶⁶ J. McDowell, *The Myth of the Mind as Detached*, cit.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

⁶⁸ J. McDowell, *What Myths?*, cit., p. 324.

⁶⁹ J. Schear, *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World*, cit., p. 13.

⁷⁰ H. Dreyfus, *The Myth of the Pervasiveness of the Mental*, cit., p. 16.

epistemological question of concepts and perception to the domain of practices and habits. To recompose the fracture between intellect and world, reason and nature, McDowell suggests us to consider Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* – that he translates as 'practical wisdom' or 'second nature'⁷¹ – presented in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. McDowell's strategy is not to shift from epistemology to ethics but to erect Aristotle's practical wisdom as an 'exemplar' or 'model' of the kind of rationality he intends to frame within his original concerns⁷².

For McDowell, «human beings are intelligibly initiated into the stretches of the space of reasons by ethical upbringing, which instils the appropriate shape into their lives. The resulting habits of thought and action are second nature»⁷³. For McDowell, it is through the cultural constitution of education that we gain our proper nature as human beings. We reach our full rationality thanks to ethical education, which is not hierarchically posited but embedded in our practical life. Here, we assist in McDowell's shift from his original epistemological question to the ethical domain, in which the distance between mind and world seems to diminish. As he specifies, «our nature is largely second nature»⁷⁴. Following the idea that our rationality responds to our second nature, McDowell turns to Aristotle. For McDowell, indeed, Aristotle's notion of practical wisdom – *phronesis* – offers us an alternative version of rationality, since «*phronesis* [...] involves knowledge of the ultimate particular thing, which cannot be attained by systematic knowledge but only by 'perception'»⁷⁵ and is defined as a «concretely situation-specific discernment»⁷⁶. In these lines, *phronesis* mitigates the strong sense of mindedness: while still indicating a kind of knowledge, it is directly linked to perception; instead of presenting rationality only in terms of absolute and contemplative mind, it provides us with the idea of context-dependent rationality. In Aristotle, McDowell finds a conception of rationality that ignores the dualisms in which Modern philosophy oscillates – namely, bald empiricism and idealism.

Hence, for McDowell, *phronesis* and second nature are not confined to ethics, but they are generalized notions: «imposing a specific shape on the practical intellect is a particular case of a general phenomenon: initiation into

⁷¹ J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 79 and ff.

⁷² J. McDowell, *What Myth?*, cit., p. 340. Aristotle's ethics appears as «the paradigmatic example of a successful synthesis of reason and nature». A. Honneth, *Between Hermeneutics and Hegelianism: John McDowell and the Challenge of Moral Realism*, N. Smith (ed.), *Reading McDowell on Mind and World*, London 2002, pp. 246-266, p. 248. McDowell includes ethics in a wider consideration, since «social philosophy, in an explicit sense, is not McDowell's interest in *Mind and World*. He is concerned with epistemology in the widest sense, without of course excluding its practical aspects». R. Bubner, *Bildung and Nature*, N. Smith (ed.), *Reading McDowell on Mind and World*, cit., pp. 209-216, p. 213.

⁷³ J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 84.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

⁷⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1142a.

⁷⁶ J. McDowell, *What Myth?*, cit., p. 340.

conceptual capacities, which include responsiveness to other rational demands besides those of ethics»⁷⁷.

McDowell extends Aristotle's conception of ethics and 'second nature' as the latter can account for the proper human nature *tout court*. Human nature is indeed for McDowell second nature since the rational and conceptual capacities of a subject are natural (eminently human) – but not 'merely natural'⁷⁸ – and, thus, have to be instilled through education, language, social practices⁷⁹, and culture⁸⁰. Since these are all aspects of human nature, McDowell considers the notion of practical wisdom and second nature as representing the appropriate cure for postulating a continuous but not reductive relationship between nature and culture, and, thus, for overcoming the dualism between nature and reason⁸¹.

Even though one of the main characteristics of practical wisdom, of our cultural schemas and habits is that they are all context-dependent, ultimately linked to perception and respondent to the world, McDowell does not put these aspects at the centre of his studies. It has been noted that McDowell's *phronesis* occupies a 'middle position' between mere reflex insofar as it contains a particular 'wisdom' and, at the same time, is distinct from autonomous rational reflection because it represents a «molded, habitualized condition of human character»⁸². However, McDowell does not fully recognize the median status of *phronesis* as he himself refuses this reading⁸³ and explicitly states that he appeals to second nature «only in connection with rationality»⁸⁴. Hence, the proper meaning of McDowell's reappropriation of Aristotle is not to offer a theory of second nature⁸⁵ but to remind us that there is no tension between the idea of the responsiveness to reasons and the idea of a natural capacity. Although the peculiarity of practical intellect is to indicate a context-related rationality, McDowell explicitly refuses to pursue an ontological reading of Aristotle and, consequently, to draw any ontological assumption about practical rationality⁸⁶.

⁷⁷ J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 84.

⁷⁸ J. McDowell, *Hegel and the Myth of the Given*, W. Welsch, K. Vieweg (eds.), *Das Interesse des Denkens: Hegel aus heutiger Sicht*, München 2003, pp. 75-88, p. 76.

⁷⁹ J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, cit., pp. 104-105.

⁸⁰ T. Carman, *Conceptualism and the Scholastic Fallacy*, J. Schear, *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World*, cit., pp. 165-177, p. 167. In this context, McDowell also mentions the notion of *Bildung* in which lies a reference to Hegel's philosophy. For a broader discussion of Hegel's notion of second nature and McDowell's reception of it, see also V. Metin Demir's contribution in this issue.

⁸¹ S. Marino, *Nietzsche and McDowell on The Second Nature of The Human Being*, «Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy», 2017, pp. 231-261, p. 238.

⁸² A. Honneth, *Between Hermeneutics and Hegelianism*, cit., p. 251.

⁸³ J. McDowell, Responses, N. Smith, *Reading McDowell on Mind and World*, cit., pp. 269-305, p. 302.

⁸⁴ J. McDowell, *The Myth of the Pervasiveness of the Mental*, cit., p. 51.

⁸⁵ D. Forman, *Autonomy as Second Nature: On McDowell's Aristotelian Naturalism*, «Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy» 2008, pp. 563-580, p. 567.

⁸⁶ J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 79. McDowell explicitly refuses to follow the interpretation of Aristotle's Ethics – that of Bernard Williams and Alasdair MacIntyre both mentioned in *Mind and World* – which wanted to derive the 'principles of ethics from the facts of an in-

In so doing, he highly stresses the subjective side of phronesis and the formation of second nature, while he neglects to tell us something about the context which habits and practical wisdom are dependent on. Therefore, even if McDowell highlights that the main feature of practical wisdom – which serves him to reconceive the nature of epistemic mind – is to be context-dependent, a feature that ensures the essential relationship between practices and world, he focuses exclusively on the subjective side of second nature.

2.2. *Dreyfus on Skills*

While in McDowell habits appear as second nature, Dreyfus mentions them as skills. In arguing against the conceptual nature of practices, Dreyfus often employs examples drawn from our daily life, habitual experiences, and sporting activities⁸⁷. In order to show that in the flow of our experience, we do not use concepts and our actions are not governed or monitored by a detached mind, he variously considers the example of the runner⁸⁸, the chess master player⁸⁹, the bike rider⁹⁰ or the everyday acts such as opening doors and using blackboard⁹¹. In these examples, Dreyfus intends to highlight how the stream of our experience, our habitual gestures and encounters with the world are egoless as they do not require the presence of self-conscious awareness, or any intellectual reflections⁹². He sustains that a chess master's rapidity in moving chess pieces or an expert biker's running result from an internalized discipline that, through the repetition of gestures, makes it possible to respond to the world solicitations

dependently given nature'. A. Honneth, *Between Hermeneutics and Hegelianism*, cit., p. 250. This refusal is related to McDowell's fear that this ontological commitment might fall prey to the *Myth of the Given* as well as to the idea of the autonomous status of natural world, proper of bald empiricism.

⁸⁷ Some of Dreyfus' examples are taken from Classic Phenomenology or French Existentialism, in which Dreyfus finds his allies against the epistemological supremacy of Cartesian mindedness and dualism.

⁸⁸ «When I run after a streetcar, when I look at the time, when I am absorbed in contemplating a portrait, there is no I. I am then (...) plunged into the world of objects it is they which present (...) themselves with attractive and repellant qualities but *me*, (...) I have disappeared». J.-P. Sartre, *Transcendence of the Ego*, New York 1957, pp. 48-49, quoted in H. Dreyfus, *The Pervasiveness of the Mental*, cit., p. 28.

⁸⁹ «A chess Grandmaster facing a position, (...), experiences a compelling sense of the issue and the best move. In a popular kind of chess called lightning chess, the whole game has to be played in two minutes. Under such time pressure, Grandmasters must make some of their moves as quickly as they can move their arms-less than a second a move-and yet they can still play Master level games. When the Grandmaster is playing lightning chess, (...) he is simply responding to the patterns on the board. At this speed he must depend entirely on perception and not at all on analysis and comparison of alternatives». H. Dreyfus, *Overcoming the Myth of the Mental*, cit., p. 53.

⁹⁰ Dreyfus acknowledges that we need an education on how to ride a bike, but «we may need such aids when learning to ride a bicycle, but we must eventually set them aside if we are to become skilled cyclists». *Ibid.* cit., p. 52.

⁹¹ The example is taken from Heidegger's phenomenology. See, H. Dreyfus, *The Pervasiveness of the Mental*, cit., p. 20.

⁹² H. Dreyfus, *Response to McDowell*, cit., p. 376.

with acquired and embodied skills. Similarly, our everyday habit, like opening a door, relies on our bodily coping which does not need to call into action any conceptual activities to occur. Dreyfus holds that his idea of non-conceptual absorbed coping is coined on Heidegger's notions of *Dasein* and *praxis* and Merleau-Ponty's notion of body. For Heidegger, *Dasein* [the human being] is primarily characterized by its Being-in-the-world, namely by its immersion in the stream of life in which it is practically engaged. From these basic features, we can appreciate that *Dasein* represents the effort to overcome the Cartesian ego and the subject-object dichotomy. To follow this attempt, Dreyfus focuses on one of the most central sections of *Being and Time*, in which Heidegger describes our everyday dealing with our environment in terms of *praxis*⁹³. The analysis of our encounter with the world starts with describing our ongoing activity that discloses our familiar world. To explain the nature of the 'ground floor' of practices, prior to the intellectual and conceptual 'upper floor', Dreyfus refers to Heidegger's example of the hammer⁹⁴. When we hammer a nail, we show our command of the hammer and of the interrelated appropriated tools. In the act of hammering, we rely on our know-how that we do not actively thematize but remains in the background. Only when, for instance, the hammer reveals itself as too heavy or broken, our worldly immersion stops, and we may start observing and judging the hammer. In this interruption, we see and judge the hammer as an object that stands against us: we abandon our habitual practical approach while concepts and language come into play reifying life and posing us as subjects⁹⁵. Combined with Heidegger's *praxis*, Dreyfus reads Merleau-Ponty's notion of body as the key element that makes our total absorption in a world «pervaded not by critical conceptuality but by lines of force»⁹⁶ possible:

For the player in action the soccer field is not an 'object.' It is pervaded by lines of force (...) and is articulated into sectors (...), which call for a certain mode of action. The field itself is not given; ... the player becomes one with it. (...) Each manoeuvre undertaken by the player modifies the character of the field and establishes new lines of force⁹⁷.

For Dreyfus, when we merge in habits, we 'act' and we 'do' through our acquired familiarity and skills, with the mediation of our bodies and 'without our minds'. Focusing on the body and skills, he mainly emphasises the individual character of practices⁹⁸ instead of analysing how habits involve as well as context. We might see that, like McDowell, in his examples and his reading

⁹³ «In Heidegger's terms, «Dasein [human being] (...) is nothing but (...) concerned absorption in the world». H. Dreyfus, *The Pervasiveness of the Mental*, cit., p. 18.

⁹⁴ H. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. Cambridge 1991.

⁹⁵ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, New York 1962, §15.

⁹⁶ H. Dreyfus, *The Pervasiveness of the Mental*, cit., p. 17.

⁹⁷ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behaviour*, Boston 1966, pp. 168-169.

⁹⁸ G. Breivik, *Skilful Coping in Everyday Life and in Sport: A Critical Examination of the Views of Heidegger and Dreyfus*, «Journal of the Philosophy of Sport», 2007, pp. 116-134, p. 124.

of phenomenology, even if in the name of a radical criticism of Cartesian *ego*, Dreyfus understands habits as personal attitudes and subjective modalities.

3. Habits as *de re* properties

Habits are the ground upon which both authors test their thesis. McDowell refers to habits as second nature, arguing that our relationship to the 'outer' nature is conceptually articulated, at first, by the context-dependent kind of rationality that he identifies in the notion of *phronesis*. On the other side, Dreyfus insists on the fact that the edifice of knowledge is based on our embodied coping, vehiculated by our everyday bodily habits and skills. Although on opposing sides, Dreyfus and McDowell are concerned with framing the role and nature of habits by looking primarily at the 'subjective side' of the issue at stake. We can agree with Dreyfus that McDowell's interpretation of *phronesis*, devoted to bridging the gap between mind and world, is infused by the mind-related terminology. McDowell identifies *phronesis* «as a model for the understanding, the faculty that enables us to recognize and create the kind of intelligibility that is a matter of placement in the space of reasons»⁹⁹. The insistence on second nature as embracing the space of reasons, or else, of concepts and rational justification, represents McDowell's primary concerns and, for Dreyfus, corresponds to an *overreaction* to the Myth of the Given. We can subscribe to Dreyfus' criticism. Moreover, we should add that McDowell, in explaining the role of second nature (our education and culture) and practical wisdom, tries to frame our mindedness neglecting how it interlaces perception and world.

Similarly, we might also agree with McDowell when he notes that Dreyfus understands conceptuality, rationality, and mind in their strongest sense. Indeed, Dreyfus' account of mindless coping responses to his conception of mindedness, which he equates with detached mind, Cartesian *ego*, and self-monitoring rationality¹⁰⁰. The above mentioned 'Battle of Myths' is based on mutual misunderstanding and criticisms, but also on philosophical overreactions. We can read this battle semantics when Dreyfus affirms that «mindedness is the enemy of embodied coping»¹⁰¹. Hence, we might see in Dreyfus' criticism of mindedness his over-reaction to intellectualism and subjectivism¹⁰², understood in their narrowest meaning. This prevents him from alternatively conceiving the role of concepts and makes him suspicious whenever rationality is called into

⁹⁹ J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 84.

¹⁰⁰ D. Zahavi, *Mindedness, Mindlessness, and First-Person Authority*, in J. Schear (ed.) *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World*, cit., pp. 320-343: 321; H. Dreyfus, *Response to McDowell*, cit., p. 373.

¹⁰¹ H. Dreyfus, *The Return of the Myth of the Mental*, cit., p. 353.

¹⁰² J. Sutton, D. McIlwain, W. Christensen, A. Geeves, *Applying Intelligence to the Reflexes: Embodied Skills and Habits between Dreyfus and Descartes*, «Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology», 2011, pp. 78-103, p. 79.

play albeit in different degrees and forms¹⁰³. While protecting themselves from mutual charges concerning their specific accounts of mindedness, they show us only the subjective side of habits, forgetting to comment on the 'objective side'. Regarding the latter issue, Dreyfus observes that McDowell recalls Heidegger when he refers to «our unproblematic openness to the world»¹⁰⁴. If openness to the world «means a general orientation of the understanding, and with that something new comes into play»¹⁰⁵, we can register that this unproblematic openness to the world is not thematized and even less what kind of world we live in. Similarly, Dreyfus' understanding of the phenomenology of habits does not assume any intake about our being *in-the-world*. In this respect, McDowell and Dreyfus are two sides of the same coin: in their expositions, habits are conceived of as *de re* structures. Habits are partially considered from the point of view of the subject, as attributions of collective mindedness for one, and individual body for the other.

4. The Phenomenology of Habits

Neglecting the world-side of the issue impoverishes the analysis of the dynamics of habits and misses the possibility of framing how perceptions intertwine concepts without being reduced to subjectivity. This omission may seem odd since phenomenology, and especially Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Dreyfus's main references, offers us a sophisticated phenomenology of habits and being-in-the-world. However, this overlook can be understood if we consider Dreyfus' strong interpretations of Classical phenomenology¹⁰⁶. Dreyfus does not fully exploit Husserl's phenomenology since he trivializes it as a phenomenology of consciousness. This specific and partial reading of Husserl's project directly depends on Heidegger's criticism of Husserl's *Ideas*¹⁰⁷, which accuses Husserl's analysis of *noesis* and *noema* of representing a Cartesian heritage¹⁰⁸. By adhering to Heidegger, Dreyfus neglects a big part of Husserl and especially his later work, which would likely be of great help to Dreyfus and his analysis of habits. Scholars have indeed recognized in later Husserl the presence of a phenomenology of habits (or else, *habitualities*)¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰³ D. Zahavi, *Mindedness, Mindlessness, and First-Person Authority*, cit., p. 320.

¹⁰⁴ J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 155.

¹⁰⁵ R. Bubner, *Bildung and Nature*, cit., p. 214.

¹⁰⁶ «Dreyfus's attempt to bolster his account of mindlessness by reference to existential phenomenology is quite problematic». D. Zahavi, *Mindedness, Mindlessness, and First-Person Authority*, cit., p. 334.

¹⁰⁷ M. Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time. Prolegomena*, Bloomington 1985.

¹⁰⁸ Husserl's phenomenology has been often accused by scholars of being «too epistemological, solipsistic and idealistic», especially with reference to his *Ideas*. See, S. Genusias, *On Nietzsche's Genealogy and Husserl's Genetic Phenomenology*, in E. Boubilil, C. Daigle (eds), *Nietzsche and Phenomenology. Power, Life, Subjectivity*, Bloomington 2013, pp. 44-60, p. 46.

¹⁰⁹ Moran provides us with a detailed terminological exegesis of the general notion of 'habit' in Husserl's phenomenology, especially in late Husserl's works, where habits find a broader discussion. Under the English word, we can gather Husserl's notions of '*Gewohnheit*' (habit) and

Late Husserl undertakes the so-called genetic phenomenology, which aims to demonstrate how concepts raise progressively from the passive layers of experience. Late Husserl explains to us that the world is not composed of mere data awaiting to be synthesised by *ego*; he rather tells us that the material world that we passively receive and perceive is organized and ordered thanks to association and temporal laws. Based on this first order, experience evolves, and our concepts and judgments find their ultimate foundation.

In this process, habits operate at the level of perceptual experience, at the level of the embodied self, and at the level of judgments¹¹⁰. *Habitualities* are fundamental for what regards our ability to move within a given horizon or context. For Husserl, *familiarity* and *habitualities* represent the primary access to the worldly *context*; they are not applied by the subject on reality, but they are forms of conjunction and repetition that ensure the relationship between the world and experience¹¹¹. In fact, we are absorbed in a world of intelligible things, events and practices because these are familiar to us, that is, they have a meaningful content to us¹¹². The context originates from the passive layers of experience not as a collection or a sum of data but as a «field of determinate structure, one of prominences and articulated particularities»¹¹³. The Husserlian notion of habit describes a kind of pre-knowledge that is not limited to the subject's individual behaviours, sub-personal, personal, and collective practices¹¹⁴, but implies the connection to an ordered world. For Husserl, our experience, already on a passive level, is generated through repeated individual experiences, namely, by recurring perceptual inputs as well as recurring movements. In the worldly flow, new impressions find their association with other similar impressions and their integration into the temporal chain of experience. We can appreciate the first formation of familiarity and habits when new impressions fit into 'the past of the subject'¹¹⁵. When the 'new' is absorbed in the stream of experience, then it participates in the 'style' of perception that will guide the individual perception and influences what will be further associated and anticipated in the evolution of perception.

The other forms of habituality descend on this basis, since perceptions and situations repeat themselves as similar and, hence, guide not only our bodily

'*Habitualitäten*' (habitualities), which appears as the most common in both Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* and *Experience and Judgment*. See, D. Moran, *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology of Habituality and Habitus*, cit.

¹¹⁰ D. Moran, *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology of Habituality and Habitus*, cit., p. 61.

¹¹¹ G. Lanzirotti, *Context as a Structure of Emergence. An Inquiry from a Phenomenological Point of View*, «9th International and Interdisciplinary Conference on Modelling and Using Context», 2015, pp. 49-57, p. 52.

¹¹² «Habits are indeed a matter of *having made the strange familiar*». M. Sheets-Johnstone, *On the Origin, Nature, and Genesis of Habit*, «Phenomenology and Mind», 2014, pp. 97-116, p. 98.

¹¹³ E. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, London 1973.

¹¹⁴ D. Moran, *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology of Habituality and Habitus*, cit., p. 53.

¹¹⁵ M. Wehrle, '*Bodies (that) Matter: The Role of Habit Formation for Identity*', «Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences», 2020, pp. 1-22.

habituality, but also our conceptual grasp of the world. Indeed, the world, which is an ordered horizon starting from the passive level of experience, is provided with a 'typical familiarity' that ensures that in the «apprehension of a particular is at work a reference of the particular object to the general type»¹¹⁶ – which is fundamental for the formation of concepts. Following this genesis, for Husserl, also tradition might be thought of as a 'socialized practical habit'¹¹⁷.

Thus, for late Husserl, from the passive level of sensation, through personal bodily skills, to the collective level of concepts and tradition, habits represent the key for the formation of our experience in the world.

Late Husserl's phenomenology of habits is not so far removed from Heidegger's phenomenology of *praxis* and Merleau-Ponty's account of body and habits. Dreyfus rightfully sustains that both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty emphasise that the relationship between us and our world is made possible thanks to the access to 'a familiar graspable world'¹¹⁸. However, Dreyfus' assimilation of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty as phenomenologists of bodily skills represents an original interpretation that, however, risks reducing Heidegger's *praxis* to the corporeal dimension on the one hand, and not fully grasping the philosophical significance of Merleau-Ponty's peculiar notion of the body on the other hand¹¹⁹.

Starting from the former, Dreyfus correctly identifies one of Heidegger's main novelties when he recognizes that, along with the effort of overcoming subjectivism, Heidegger also overturns the hierarchy between *praxis* and *theoresis*, considering the former more fundamental than the latter. However, Heidegger's notion of *praxis* does not indicate bodily movements or behaviours, but a much more complex phenomenon. Although Heidegger does not explicitly use the notion of 'habit', this is at the heart when he pursues the phenomenology of our average everydayness and especially of what he calls *readiness-to-hand* (*Zuhandenheit*) of equipment when we are involved in using it¹²⁰, that here we call *praxis*.

When Heidegger refers to our habits, analysing our use of the hammer, our familiarity with the table where we sit, around which we move, or the desk on which the professor takes his lectures, he gathers, under the practical *spectrum*, both the worldly and the conceptual aspects of our experience. *Praxis* is «not a bare perceptual cognition, but rather that kind of concern which manipulates things

¹¹⁶ E. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, cit. p. 317.

¹¹⁷ E. Husserl, *Die Lebenswelt. Auslegungen der vorgegebenen Welt und ihrer Konstitution. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1916–1937)*, Dordrecht 2008, p. 527.

¹¹⁸ H. Dreyfus, *The Pervasiveness of the Mental*, cit., p. 16. Dreyfus attributes this conception to Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, but the idea that experience takes place in a meaningful and familiar world is also held by the late Husserl.

¹¹⁹ Whilst Heidegger does not say much about the body of *Dasein*, the bodily and corporal dimension is the central focus of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.

¹²⁰ H. Dreyfus, *Why Heideggerian AI Failed and how Fixing it would require Making it more Heideggerian*, «Artificial Intelligence», 2007, pp. 1137-1160. See also Agree who calls it the «account of everyday routine activities», P. Agree, *Computation and Human Experience*, Cambridge 1997, p. 243.

and puts them to use; and this brings with it its own kind of ‘knowledge’¹²¹. Thus, *praxis* involves, at the same time, perception, and knowledge. For what concerns the worldly side of our practical dealings, Heidegger does not provide us with an ontology of what there is; nevertheless, we can appreciate that he does not conceive our world as a cluster of data. He also addresses the mind-independent value of the ‘outer’ world when he comments on the appropriateness of a tool¹²² or its obstruction when *praxis* is interrupted. At the same time, in our practical dealing, we communicate with one another and we share the same understanding of our surroundings as a social community. Our *praxis* is nourished by our conceptual activities that we put into play when we live. In fact, our practical being-in-the-world is not merely passive, since our «being in the world is nothing other than this already-operating-with-understanding»¹²³. Conceptual activities and linguistic performances are not ruled out from the practical domain. Thus, the category of being-in-the-world is meant to grasp in a unitary structure the articulation between subject and world without falling into naturalism or idealism.

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* represents a reply to both empiricism and intellectualism, rejecting the idea that perception consists of sensations or «qualia as primitive building blocks» of experience, as well as the idea that perception should be explained in terms of thoughts, concepts, or judgments¹²⁴. It is precisely in this framework that we shall place Merleau-Ponty’s reflection on habits. The question of habit, scattered throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, is closely linked to the notion of the body to the point of seeming to overlap with it¹²⁵. To understand the whole problem of habits in Merleau-Ponty, we need to refer to his conception of the body or better of the body-schema. The body does not simply indicate the physical corporeal dimension but is what allows us to move into the environment and by means of which we are ‘conscious’ of the world¹²⁶. With regard to the dynamic between the body and habits, and their relationship with the world, we can identify two main features: firstly, in the formation of a habit through our bodily movements, the body ‘understands’ the movement, that is, it experiences «the accord between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the realization – and the body is our anchorage in a world»¹²⁷; secondly, the acquisition of habits

¹²¹ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, cit., p. 95.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹²³ M. Heidegger, *Logic. The Question of Truth*, Bloomington 2010, p. 123.

¹²⁴ T. Carman, *Sensation, Judgment, and the Phenomenal Field*, T. Carman (ed.), *Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 50-73, p. 51. In Merleau-Ponty’s project, we find the attempt to overcome both empiricism and intellectualism in favour of a ‘third way’. L. Vanzago, *Merleau-Ponty*, Roma 2012.

¹²⁵ Let us consider a passage in which Merleau-Ponty claims: «my own body is the primordial habit, the one that conditions all others and by which they can be understood». M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London 2012, p. 93.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

is not due to mere bodily reflex but is «surely the grasping of a signification»¹²⁸, since worldly perception, for Merleau-Ponty, is already charged with *meaning*.

For Merleau-Ponty, habits, which reside neither in thought nor in the objective body, belong to the body conceived of as the «mediator of a world»¹²⁹. This last observation renders Dreyfus' insistence on Merleau-Ponty's conception of bodily skills as something to be neatly opposed to mental representations and «stored' [...] as the solicitations of situations in the world»¹³⁰, a partial interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's account in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Although Merleau-Ponty recurrently employs examples concerning dancers, instrumental abilities, sportive capacities, he enlarges his notion of habits including also «our habits of speech and thought»¹³¹. Indeed, even if generally speaking for Merleau-Ponty the acquisition of a new habit does not require the intervention of intellectual synthesis, the «entire problem of habit»¹³² cannot be «circumscribed merely by a reflection on the acquisition of a skill or facility of movement»¹³³. The median position of the body and habits is highly significant when Merleau-Ponty's analysis of habits specifically refers to the notion of body schema. In the definition of the body as body schema we may find a reminder of Kant's schematism¹³⁴, a hint that addresses our reading of the body towards the idea that Merleau-Ponty understands it as having a median function and a structuring role¹³⁵ that intertwines perception and thought. Although in Merleau-Ponty's project, habits and skills actually arise and belong to the bodily dimension, the body is not a *de re* property of the subject, but it represents the core notion for overcoming the dichotomy between mere body and mental consciousness. The notion of body schema represents a linkage between thought, body, and world¹³⁶ rather than a separation, as Dreyfus would sustain. The complexity of the phenomenon is expressed when Merleau-Ponty himself asks: «but if habit is neither a form of knowledge nor an automatic reflex, then what is it?»¹³⁷. This aporetic question goes along with the fertile ambiguity that characterizes the body schema and habits, that need to be understood as paradigmatic notions for overcoming the dualism between empiricism and intellectual, and as the effort to find a synthesis among the meaningful world, the bodily sphere and the conceptual dimension.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹³⁰ H. Dreyfus, *Why Heideggerian AI Failed and how Fixing it would require Making it more Heideggerian*, cit., p. 1144.

¹³¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, cit., p. 167.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹³³ M. Sinclair, *Is Habit 'The Fossilised Residue of a Spiritual Activity'? Ravaisson, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty*, «Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology», 2011, pp. 33-52, pp. 46-47.

¹³⁴ S. Matherne, *Kantian Themes in Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Perception*, «Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie», 2016, pp. 193-230, p. 195. However, we should notice that Merleau-Ponty takes the notion of body schema from the neurologist Henry Head.

¹³⁵ T. Carman, *Sensation, Judgment, and the Phenomenal Field*, cit. p. 70.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹³⁷ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, cit., p. 145.

In Classic phenomenology, paraphrasing Eugen Fink, the notion of habit represents an ‘operative concept’¹³⁸ that lies at the heart of our experience and works like an engine. It is a philosophical concept that phenomenologists employ for radically rethinking the traditional schemas of our experience. Habits are not limited to describe our behaviours or our approach to the world. Differently from Dreyfus and McDowell, habits are not thought of as subject-related modalities or as *de re* properties, but are philosophical instruments, meant to unfold the complexity of our experience – which embrace both the perceptual and the conceptual level – as well as to debunk and overcome the intellectualist tradition.

5. The Paradigmatic Notion of Habits

The relationship between perception and conceptuality remains a central but unsolved issue in epistemology. The Dreyfus-McDowell *Debate* has reached a stalemate. On the one side, conceptualists have to demonstrate how concepts inform perception without endorsing idealism; on the other, non-conceptualists seem to rely on the dichotomy of body-concepts without explaining their relation. In considering the strategy to tackle the issue of the interconnection between these two spheres, I think that the *Debate* has missed the fertile chance to profit from the dual and ambiguous nature of habits. Although habits are fundamental for the *Debate*, I wanted to point out that Dreyfus and McDowell do not fully benefit from phenomenology and do not fully exploit the notion of habits. McDowell has moved from Kant’s metaphysics to Aristotle’s ethics, seeking an alternative model of rationality. Then, he has focused on the fact that we are shaped by our upbringing and culture that coordinate the intersection of reason and the world. In accounting for practical wisdom, he is mostly interested in sketching a more concrete, context-dependent kind of rationality, different from the idea of a detached *ego*. But how our concepts meet our perception or how factual situations participate when we make decisions, remain in the shadows. Dreyfus instead has stressed the individual side of habits and has emphasised the function of the body in everyday activities and sporting disciplines. He has divided the ‘ground floor’ from the ‘upper floor’ of knowledge and let aside to specify what kind of world products our habits. We might observe that, in both authors, habits appear as those matters of facts upon which we have to decide the *status* of concepts.

As we have seen that, in Classic phenomenology, the description of habits serves for the much more radical enterprise of overturning the philosophical tradition. The notion represents a proper philosophical instrument to outline a renovated phenomenology of experience.

I would like to suggest a diverse reading of the role of habits. In view of understanding the link between our conceptual activity and the outer world, we

¹³⁸ E. Fink, *Operative Begriffe in Husserls Phaenomenologie*, Freiburg-Munich 1976.

can consider habits not as a crutch for consolidating this or that thesis. We can rather think of the nature of habits as a starting point for the epistemological investigation of concepts and perception. In other words, we can recognize habits (their broad and variegated meanings, their nature, their dynamics, their constitutive elements) as the dimension in which we can understand the relationship between the subjective/conceptual and the objective/worldly sides. We might then focus on the ambivalent and intricate character of habits to see how the allegedly separated spheres merge one into the other. In this perspective the epistemological ambiguity of habits does not represent an aporia to resolve; rather a fertile opportunity to reconceive the articulation of concepts and perception. In other words, instead of questioning if habits are conceptual or not, we shall consider habits as a *paradigmatic* dimension of experience. In this perspective, habits are not mere facts to investigate but represent a model to define the epistemological structure of our experience.

The ambiguous nature of habits challenges our inquiry under several respects. With respect to their origin, habits are human attitudes, but they are highly context-dependent. Both in sport disciplines and in cultural rituals, habits can be socially shaped or activated by specific environmental triggers¹³⁹. To explain how they raise, both sides shall be observed. Consequently, we can argue that we passively and actively interact with habits. As Husserl claims, already on the passive level, our experience forms kinds of habit through repeated actions, perceptions and movements while responding to recurring perceptual inputs¹⁴⁰. Habits are indeed entrenched in the formation of our experience, guiding our bodily dimension – broadly understood – and remain in the background while we passively live through them. For what concerns cultural habits, Heidegger tells us that our being-in-the-world is originally ‘thrown’ into our context¹⁴¹, that is, we are already and always passively absorbed in a given cultural horizon and immediately involved in its history. For which, our access to habits does not depend on the agent’s will or intention but rather on what is conventionally available¹⁴². However, at the same time, we are able to identify our proper habits, observe, and judge others’ – we judge as ‘bad habit’ when we see someone biting his own nails, we are not able to understand the meaning of a certain cultural behaviour alien from our routines. Not only we can actively recognize a habit, but we can also change it or creatively form new sort of habits¹⁴³.

With respect to temporality, although habits are contingent and context-dependent, nonetheless they are hard to change. Habits sometimes are quite conservative since they adjust very slowly to changing circumstances¹⁴⁴. Thanks

¹³⁹ S. Matthews, *The Significance of Habit*, cit., pp. 12 and 18.

¹⁴⁰ M. Wehrle, *Bodies (that) Matter: The Role of Habit Formation for Identity*, «Phenomenology and Cognitive Sciences», 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-020-09703-0>.

¹⁴¹ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, cit., § 38.

¹⁴² S. Matthews, *The Significance of Habit*, cit. p. 13.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*.

¹⁴⁴ D. Lohmar, *Types and Habits. Habits and Their Cognitive Background in Hume and Husserl*, «Phenomenology and Mind», 2014, pp. 49-63, p. 51.

to this character, habits tacitly operate in our daily life, they last in time, and they guide us without our active awareness. However, habits may change rapidly when their appropriateness fails in satisfying the relationship between the agent, the action, and its context.

With respect to the issue of perception and concepts, we may observe that if habits may be automatic, nonetheless, our familiarity with our environment involves our conceptual capacities. In our practical dealings, we interact with others and we evaluate or criticize the adequacy of a habit. In this light, habits may offer us the possibility to think of a different kind of conceptuality and mindedness, weaker than the Cartesian *ego* and context-dependent as Aristotle's *phronesis*.

The dynamics pertaining to habits is complex as it combines elements that the tradition ascribes to diverse (if not opposite) domains. Given their obvious and ubiquitous presence within the forms of our life, they usually serve us as examples to clarify how our experience works. Even when primarily considered, habits still occupy somehow a secondary role. As we have seen in the *Debate*, habits offer us concrete descriptions of how the epistemological principles at stake function. We have to acknowledge that the *Debate* has the merit to bring back into the heart of epistemology the issue of habits, demonstrating how the metaphysical battle is pursued in the field of practices. Nevertheless, I wanted to stress that both authors have dealt with only two possible meanings of habits and focused only on the subjective side, transforming them into *de re* events. The brief glimpse into phenomenology gave us a further hint on the potential contribution of habits; they are elements in which the structure of the world inextricably adjusts to the structure of experience and *vice versa* and, therefore, they are useful instruments for overturning tradition. In light of these two kinds of conceptions, I wanted to indicate a third option in which habits are not only thought of as facts or philosophical tools. We could consider the dimension of habits as the beginning for the philosophical inquiry, that is, we could identify the nature of habits and its components as the basis on which we can pursue the investigation towards the question of perception and conceptuality. In this perspective, we would achieve two goals. First of all, we would redeem habits from their secondary role and highlight their fundamental meaning for epistemology; secondly, we would undertake a different strategy: reading habits as a *paradigmatic* notion would imply a methodological reversal. We would not start by defining the nature of conceptual content and perception and then look for a confirmation of our view within the dynamics of our practices. On the contrary, we would start by analysing the nature of habits – stressing their ambivalent articulation – and, only after, identify the *status* of concepts and test their connection with the world.

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