

SITUATED ACTING AND EMBODIED COPING

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ABSTRACT: The pragmatist account of action in Brandom's *Making it Explicit* offers a compelling defense of social embeddedness of acting. Its virtue consists of redefining the agent's reasons for action in terms of her public commitments and entitlements. However, this account remains too intellectualist insofar as it neglects the embodied sense allowing the agent to respond to various situational demands and social constraints. In my article, I provide a less disembodied account of action that draws on Dreyfus's emphasis on bodily skills as constitutive aspects of intentional acting. Dreyfus' notion of absorbed coping certainly highlights the role of body and affectivity in guiding the performance of action, but it ends up in underestimating the role of discursive and conceptual capacities in human agency. Against Dreyfus, I will demonstrate that involved and embodied coping not only answers to the demands of a given situation, but also involves responsiveness to reasons. My ambition is to defend a continuity between practical reasoning, i.e. our capacity to justify our performances through reasons, and our embodied coping skills, a continuity that has been overlooked by Brandom's intellectualist and denied by Dreyfus' anti-rationalist accounts.

Keywords: Action, Intention, Reasons to Act, Skillful coping, Brandom, Dreyfus

Introduction

Against all conventional attempts to explain action by agent's individual beliefs and desires, Brandom reveals and emphasizes the social dimension of acting. His normative pragmatism explains that the sociality of action is grounded in our capacity to justify our various performances in the game of giving and asking for reasons, where our intentions become public commitments to be acknowledged by our peers as entitlements for our acting. In the first part, I will lay out the merits of Brandom's account that consist in making explicit the social and rational underpinnings of action. Instead of being identified with private mental states, reasons to act should be viewed as social commitments that we publicly endorse. Since the content of intention is determined by its articulation within the game of reasoning, all intentional acting presupposes discursive and

therefore social practices as the background of their intelligibility. Responsiveness to reasons and sensitivity to shared rules are thus revealed as essential to our intentional agency. However, Brandom owes his readers an explanation about the way in which the sensitivity to rules intervenes not only in our endorsing practical commitments to act, but constitutes also part and parcel of performing the action. In Brandom, the agent *first* adopts a practical attitude, which *then* brings about her action causally. On this account, only the first stage of deliberation and endorsing practical commitments involves sensitivity to norms and rules, while the bodily execution of action does not. It merely follows from the antecedent endorsement of practical commitments. His conception of action thus remains only contingently embodied since it reduces the body to a mere instrument of realizing the practical attitude adopted on a discursively articulated level.

The second half of my paper seeks to redefine our sensitivity to norms and rules in a less intellectualist fashion. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus' analysis of motor intentionality, I strive to expose the role of the body in rule-following. More precisely, I claim that our embodied coping skills and habits allow us to be sensitive to norms without a need for representation. My aim is to delineate our bodily responsiveness to the normative significance of the situation in which we are actively engaged. The embodied sensitivity to rules entails that one's own body is responsive to the affordances as well as to the social constraints and situational demands. Thanks to our habits, we implicitly and spontaneously understand what is proper and improper in a given social milieu. In other words, our acting is constantly backed by our embodied sense of correctness and incorrectness, which is engrained in our acquired yet flexible habits and skills. However, while Dreyfus considers absorbed bodily coping as non-rational and non-conceptual, I argue on the contrary that our action remains responsive to reasons even when we do not articulate them (not even for ourselves). Such thing is possible because, first, we count on reasons that are deposited or sedimented in commonly shared bodily habits, and secondly, we rely upon

our coupling with the norm-governed and familiar social environment to which we constantly adjust our conduct. Then, my final aim is to defend a continuity between practical reasoning (i.e. the capacity to justify our performances through reasons) and our embodied coping skills, which is overlooked in Brandom's intellectualist approach and explicitly denied by Dreyfus' anti-rationalist polemics. While both authors fail to notice the reciprocal ties between our embodied coping skills and discursive capacities, I will demonstrate that our involved and embodied coping with the demands of a given situation necessarily entails responsiveness to reasons and, conversely, that our linguistic performances presuppose our bodily responsiveness to solicitations.

The social dimension of action in Brandom's pragmatism

Brandom's pragmatic and inferential account of action received relatively little attention in the otherwise large corpus of literature inspired by his normative pragmatism.¹ Such neglect is not only surprising, but also regretful, since Brandom's redefinition of intentions in terms of acknowledged commitments opens up new ways to understand human agency and its dependency upon the shared space of reasons. According to the traditional view, action differs from mere behavior to the extent in which they are brought for and guided by agent's intentions, resulting from her individual beliefs and desires. Against such an individualistic or monological account of action, Brandom objects that we cannot start with "intrinsically motivating preferences or desires" that would ground the authority of "norms governing practical reasoning and defining rational action" (Brandom 2000, 31). Such a conception would amount to the impossible task to derive norms from merely first-person attitudes of members of the community, criticized as psychologism since Frege's times. In the special case of action, such criticism resists any derivation of what is valid (gen-

eral norms) from what individual members of the community actually take to be valid (because something occurs within their minds). Brandom's proposal consists of considering things the other way around: it is only because we are able to endorse normative commitments and to attribute to each other normative entitlements to act that we can be said to hold particular intentions, beliefs, desires, preferences and other practical attitudes. In other words, only because we rationally assess each other's intentions in the game of giving and asking for reasons, that each one of us can be sure of having identifiable intentions. It is precisely this discursive articulation of our reasons that allows us to be acknowledged as actors with intentions amendable to critical assessment, which includes assessment about what should we do to make these intentions true.

Furthermore, the very content of the agent's intention is beholden to her capacity to articulate and defend its *rationale* in the social practice consisting of exposing the premises behind such intention and defending the acceptability of its consequences. It follows that an agent would be unable to identify her own intentions (and therefore unable to act in the light of reasons and norms) if she were not able to articulate their content in the social game of reason-giving. Thus, each of us, in order to properly assess the meaning of what we intend to do, is answerable to social norms, according to which all such inferential relations between intentions and reasons for action are assessed in discursive practices. In other words, it is only within a larger sphere of public discussion that we might ascertain whether our intentions – in their inferential connections with other practical attitudes – provide a sufficient set of reasons to justify one's action.²

How does a discursive articulation of practical reasons in the reasons-giving game come about? We expose our own intention into the public space of reasons and

¹ The two notable and insightful exceptions are R. Stout (2010) and S. Levine (2012).

² For an instructive overview of Brandom's account of the social dimension of reasoning and the inferential articulation of the content of normative attitudes, see Koreň and Kolman, "Introduction: Inferentialism's Years of Travel and Its Logico-Philosophical Calling" in Beran, Kolman & Koreň (2018).

thus we make our action intelligible and treat it as a candidate for a rational assessment. Insofar as these reasons are acknowledged, they become commitments for which we are accountable in front of others. On this account, when the agent declares what she intends to do, she endorses a commitment rather than describing her inner state of mind. Think about Luther's famous words "Here I stand, I can do no other" when he was summoned to the Diet of Worms in 1521. Rather than factual assertion resulting from his self-knowledge, such an attestation is better understood as an illocutionary act through which he gave a public account of the link between his convictions and the way in which he intended to conduct himself in his further confrontation with opponents.

Endorsing a commitment entails that we let ourselves being judged by our capacity to act and live up to them. In this way, *what we intend* is also accountable to *what we really do*. No matter how much I cherish the idea of becoming a guitar-player, if I never start practicing guitar and dedicate all my leisure time to sports or family, I *should* doubt about the reality of any such intention (and I might be challenged by others to question the authenticity of my intention). I can thus be sure to have distinct intentions to the extent that I am able to act accordingly to them. The crucial point of Brandom's inferential pragmatics lies in the further development of this idea: what it means to act accordingly to such and such intention cannot be decided unilaterally by me, since it is a matter of public articulation of stakes involved. Even in the case of a supposedly lonely guitar-player, the fulfilling of her intention to become one is answerable to the recognition by others that she holds in esteem as successful players or at least as persons able to judge her performances. In the absence of reciprocal attribution of commitments, each agent would be accountable only to herself, i.e. would be committed to whatever *seems* right to herself. But if there is no way to establish that one is wrong about one's commitment, there is no commitment at all. Herein lies the social dimension of acting for reasons: whether the agent is committed to act in a certain way depends

upon what she is able to articulate in the norm-laden and social discursive practices, not upon something that only she can access through introspection. In other words, if knowing one's intentions implies knowing *what must hold true* for accomplishing them successfully, then our personal practical commitments are intelligible only within open-ended and inferentially articulated practices.

Then, not only is the content of agent's intention, but also the meaning of her action based on such intention determined by larger inferential significance of her avowed attitudes. In order to make sense of our action, our co-actors and interlocutors strive to infer collateral commitments that serve as both premises and consequences of our practical stances. Furthermore, one's commitment to some intentions and performances might remove her entitlement to other performances. Thus, in one of previous Czech governments, a Social Democrat Minister for Education put her child to a private and high-priced *lycée* and then acted surprised when criticized for her (supposedly private) act. 'Does not anybody strive to get the best available education for her children?', she claimed. Yet, public opinion and press did not dispute at all the intention to see her child placed in the best school possible, but rather her intention to act politically as a Social Democrat Minister for Education. This intention, no matter how sincerely held by the Minister herself, was indeed identified in the public debate with a commitment to making the best available education in public, rather than private schools. What can we learn from this actual case is that we are often held responsible for the implications of our commitments beyond what we are able to grasp reflectively. Admittedly, such explicit commitment appears most visibly within the field of political action, where one is repeatedly and most severely questioned not only about her intentions, but also about their inferential implications. Nevertheless, we are required to undertake similar responsibilities even in our daily lives, whenever we are solicited to provide reasons for our acting by others or whenever we invite them to support our initiatives, in the hope of enhancing our own capacity to act.

Brandom's merits and shortcomings

The principal merit of Brandom's account of action consists in emphasizing the social dimension of action that disqualifies any individualistic or monological view of acting. Brandom invites us to consider action as socially embedded not only in its overt performance, but also in its very intentional structure, insofar as he suggests to treat intentions as publicly endorsed commitments, rather than private mental states. The social dimension of acting is further developed in his claim that any reasons to act worthy of its name should be – at least in principle – linguistically articulated. Finally, Brandom is able to account for the difference between human agency and responsiveness to rules, on the one hand, and inanimate objects' subjection to laws of nature, on the other. Such difference is most often explained in a Kantian fashion: while objects obey to laws blindly, rational agents act according to the *idea* of principles that guide their action. In order to avoid representationalist connotation of Kant's "Vorstellung von Regeln zu bestimmen" (1968, 32), Brandom (1994, 31) prefers to insist on agent's ability to adopt an "attitude towards the law" to be followed.³ Between the rule and its instantiation in action, agent's attitude towards the law would amount to introducing a third term allowing for a freedom within constraints of the rule-governed space of reasons. In other words, agent's capacity to endorse practical commitments in the light of the rule(s) to be followed would account for a difference between acting for reasons and obeying to natural necessities. While rational agents are sensitive and responsive to the rules, inanimate things in nature are merely subject to natural laws. At the same time, Brandom would still be able to bypass the Kantian reliance on the mental representation of law as the distinctive feature of human responsiveness to rules and norms.

³ Stout (2010) provides a detailed and enlightening analysis about Kantian heritage in Brandom's differentiating between the ways rational agents and inanimate objects are subject to rules.

That is why he insists, that our attitudes towards the rules, according to which we guide our conduct, are of social, public and linguistic nature (Brandom 1994, 31ff).

His anti-representationalist stance notwithstanding, Brandom's picture is beholden to a mediational epistemological picture to the extent in which it separates our perception from our acting and inserts our discursive capacities as an intermediary between perceptual "entries" and practical "exits", to use Sellarsian terminology embraced by Brandom (1994, 235). On this view, the agent, informed by his perceptual and discursively articulated acquaintance with the standing situation, *first* adopts a practical attitude according to his self-positioning in the space of reasons, which *then* brings about her action causally:

What in action causally elicits the production of performable states of affairs (by the exercise of reliable differential responsive dispositions) is in the first instance deontic attitudes rather than statuses: acknowledgments of practical commitments (Brandom 1994, 261).

Brandom not only owes his readers a better explanation of what these "differential responsive dispositions" might be, but most of all, his account introduces a major gap between our perceptual capacities and the guidance of our active performance, since our acting upon the world decides how the world appears to us, what phenomena will become relevant in the situation in which we actively partake. Insofar as it fails to recognize this essential entanglement between acting and perceiving, Brandom's account reminds the classical picture according to which perception provides the input to be grasped by our cognitive and conceptual capacities in order to provide, as a final step, a determinate reply to the same external environment. To be sure, Brandom's rejection of the "myth of the given" is a clear sign of his distance towards this empiricist affiliation, the fact remains that he re-introduces an illegitimate separation between perception and action, with a space of reasons standing between perceptual entry transitions and behavioral exits.

Furthermore, one might raise objections against Brandom's decision to separate the realization of our

practical commitments into two stages. In the first stage, we endorse a practical attitude through our partaking in the reason-giving game. In the second one, we are causally induced to act according to our acknowledgment of such commitment: “In action, alterations of deontic attitude, specifically acknowledgements of practical commitments, serve as stimuli eliciting nonlinguistic performances.” (Brandom 1994, 235). Rowland Stout has already identified an important negative side-effect of Brandom’s “two-ply theory of action” that limits our responsiveness to rules only to the first step consisting of production of attitudes:

The second stage involves things actually being made to happen but involves no sensitivity to rules (or reasons). This fails to take seriously the idea of action as a process of rationally transforming the world— i.e., a process in which the changes characteristic of the action involve the rationality characteristic of agency. Instead the rationality characteristic of agency is manifested in the production of attitudes (Stout 2010, 148).

If the second stage is identified as a causal response elicited by our acknowledgement of commitment, then our performance of the attitude cannot be guided by our responsiveness to rules. I subscribe to Stout’s criticism and intend to develop it further into two interrelated arguments that will prove crucial to my own position. To my understanding, what is omitted in Brandom’s account is precisely our embodied sensitivity to the specific demands of a given situation and, consequently, the embeddedness of our temporally unfolding acting to the ever-changing and open-ended situation.

First, the practical skills involved in our competent performance of action are open to normative correction to the extent they are publicly expressed. If the only thing involved in bringing about the action were the causal functioning of our objective body and its physiological mechanisms, there would be no possibility to assess its functioning as competent or incompetent, appropriate or inappropriate. However, it is a matter of fact that skills involved in our performances are deemed corrigible and hence accountable to our shared norms of conduct. Concerning the open-ended character of situa-

tion in which we have to act, Brandom completely omits to account for our embodied capacity to track subtle or profound modifications of the game that unfolds while we are acting, because of our own initiative and other agents’ responses to it. Our acting has to remain flexible insofar as the agent must repeatedly provide refined replies to a fluctuating pull of new solicitations and affordances that has not been present to her at the moment of her initial acknowledging of commitment.

Dreyfus on embodied coping and sensitivity to solicitations

In order to see how the two above-mentioned requirements for situated acting are met by our bodily involvement in a situation, let us first turn to Hubert Dreyfus’ account of absorbed coping. According to Dreyfus, most of our actions consist of perceiving *what to do* and responding to it without thinking. We do not even need to formulate any intention in order to guide our action, we rather perceive a possibility to act and we let ourselves to be drawn by such perceived affordances and solicitations. Dreyfus (2013: 37n12) helpfully introduces a conceptual distinction between “affordances” and “solicitations”. On Gibson’s account (1986: 127–43), affordances correspond to all perceivable possibilities offered by an environment to a certain kind of creature and they are real features of the world. Solicitations, for Dreyfus, are those affordances that are salient from the perspective of our long or short-term projects and that are able to draw us to act precisely because of their relevance. Seeing a stick as an affordance to swing it like a weapon is only possible for an organism equipped with longer hands, but it is perceived as a solicitation to act only for an agent ready to engage in fighting (be it real or playful).⁴

Dreyfus’ emphasis on our practical openness to affordances and our sensitivity to solicitations provides a welcome antidote to Brandom’s account of agency that

⁴ However, whether an affordance will appear as a solicitation to an agent depends not only to organism’s needs and desires, as Dreyfus would have it, but also to her acknowledged, i.e. “Brandomian” commitments.

omits to take into consideration the embodied skills allowing us to cope with the difficulties and requirements of any interpersonal transaction. These skills include our affective attunement to various demands that the situation imposes on us. More than often, we feel that the situation calls for an intervention of our part. For example, I feel drawn to reply in an angrily way to a demeaning offense. At the same time, I remain affectively attuned to norms of conduct and various hierarchical positions of other agents and the right ways to address them. Certain possibilities to redeem the situation just feel right, while others are simply out of question as inappropriate, without any need to think about them. These considerations aim to enlarge Brandom's overly intellectualist account of sensitivity to norms, that focuses unilaterally on our rational and intralinguistic assessments. We can see that the normative dimension of our conduct entails more than responsiveness to reasons and includes all kinds of "felt pulls" and embodied responsiveness to various degrees of salience in perceived opportunities for action.

Furthermore, our affective sensitivity serves to guide our acting in providing a constant feedback about how we fare in respect with tasks to be performed. Not only is our body sensitive to the demands of a given situation, but it is also sensitively monitoring if its conduct meets or not such demands. Such a tracking includes affective responsiveness to our ongoing and partial successes and failures in all such endeavors. Each agent unreflectively, but continuously assesses if she is doing well at the given moment precisely because she senses a tension when loosing or deviating from an optimal grip on things (Dreyfus 2014, 246). Such a feedback provides us both with a sense of situation and with felt hints or indicators telling us whether our acting is making the situation better or worse. For all these various reasons, our acting upon the world might be purposive without the need of conscious representations of a goal to be achieved and without endorsing a discursively articulate commitment.

How do these descriptions of absorbed coping relate to Brandom's account of action? How does Dreyfus' phenomenological analysis of embodied responsiveness

to solicitations modify or supplement Brandom's understanding of action's responsiveness to reasons? In my view, one promising way to remedy the insufficiencies of Brandom's and other intellectualist accounts of acting would be to recognize the specificity of the space of motivations as the primary ground allowing to make sense of human action, and then, to consider how to move from there to the realm of reasons.

The space of motivations

For Dreyfus (2005, 56), we primarily move and orient ourselves within the space of motivations, where we rely on our situation-specific responsiveness to the most salient affordances. Emphasizing the space of motivations as the primary background of our being-in-the-world opens a promising path for understanding how we are *moved* by the world neither in a mechanistic nor in an idealistic sense: we are moved neither by mental representations of things, nor by their physical and causal impingements on us, but first and foremost by their perceived solicitations in relation to our bodily capacities. My proposal aims to apply Dreyfus' as well as Merleau-Ponty's account of motivation in order to emphasize the role of the lived and living body in the genesis of affective monitoring that guides our action. In particular, the methodological choice of starting with the space of motivations – rather than with causal interactions or cognitive judgments – allows us to appreciate the contribution of kinesthetic experiences to the monitoring of how one's body is positioned with regards to the requirements of its project and to the normatively structured environment. These two kinds of demands are not to be thought separately, but rather as merging together, to the extent that the situation in which I am involved is articulated primarily according to "I can" or "I can't", rather than "I think". The first thing to observe is that our performances within a perceptual field are closely tied to felt variations of our capacity to meet the requirements, novelties and disturbances of our environment. I am affectively responsive to all kinds of tugs and pulls of the

world according to what I am able or unable to do about them. I am affectively sensible to certain matters as threatening when I tacitly see my bodily capacities restricted (typically in dark places or in other cases of momentary sensory impairment), as frustrating when I perceive others as obstacles on my path, and as exciting when I hope with uncertainty to be capable of living up to some rare occasion. As an integral part of this synchronization or “living communication with the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 53), kinesthetic experiences and other “gut feelings” tacitly shape and articulate worldly matters into relevant, recalcitrant, attracting and otherwise existentially significant objects or situations. Bodily immersed in the space of motivations, we are constantly seeking to ascertain our grip on things.

This practical and non-conceptual orientation is something that Brandom himself acknowledges as an essential part of intentionality. Furthermore, intentionality itself is not so much the mark of mental, as it was for Brentano and his followers, but rather the general capacity proper to sentient beings allowing them to comport themselves towards the world. „[The] founding idea of pragmatism is that the most fundamental kind of intentionality (in the sense of directedness towards objects) is the practical involvement with objects exhibited by a sentient creature dealing skillfully with its world” (Brandom 2008, 178). Despite his acknowledgment of practical and infra-rational know-how as a basic kind of our relating to the world, Brandom does not recognize the space of motivations as the third term that can be neither reduced to “space of causes” (laws of nature), nor to “space of reasons” (rational assessments). As we have seen, in his “two-ply” account of human agency, he decomposes our capacity to act into two aspects and situates each of them into one of the two distinct spheres: “an element of conceptually articulated endorsement, and a reliable differential responsive disposition” (Brandom 2010: 328). In its first stage, endorsing a practical commitment is entirely situated within a space of reasons; in its output, the final stage, the very performance of an action is reduced to a causal interaction

with the objective world (including our body seen as object).

For Brandom, our action is intelligible only insofar we are able to account for it in the game of giving and asking for reasons. He thus omits the possibility of making sense of one’s own or others’ acting in terms of “being motivated” by the situation and its most salient affordances to which we are immediately responsive. As I have argued above, in order to remain the optimal way of replying to unfolding demands of one’s environment, the performance of an action cannot amount to nothing more but an *exit transition* from the space of reasons as if this final output were already determined by an earlier commitment endorsed by the agent. The space of motivations is not without a logic of its own: it is the logic of motor cues, vector forces of attraction and repulsion, salient perceptual affordances and gradually relevant aspects to be dealt with. Action is thus intelligible on a more basic level, when we recognize our activity to be motivated by the affordances of the given situation to which we are unreflectively responsive. Because of the binary separation of reasons and causes as the only two candidates allowing to make sense of action, Brandom’s account does not have means to explain action out of emotion and other pre-conceptual, affective attunements to motivationally salient aspects of the situation.

In Dreyfus’ account of action, to be motivated to act in a certain way should not be equated with acting for reasons. First of all, felt tensions, gut feelings or immediate perceptual assessment of salient affordances motivate the agent to act *in a certain way* or to take a certain *course of action*, but they do not necessarily determinate the goals of the action itself, as reasons for acting do. While discursive articulation of reasons is supposed to identify *what* should be done, perceiving a salient affordance indicates a way to be followed and possible scenarios one might expect when following the indicated path. Secondly, while reasons to act might be shared and acknowledged as valid from a detached perspective, motivations to act are often far too much situation-specific to count as reasons (Dreyfus 2007b, 107). Moti-

vations are simply part of agent's subjective engagement with the ongoing and ambivalent situation, while the space of reasons requires to appeal, in Dreyfus' picture, to universal claims about *what counts as reason for what*. The third difference is connected with the previous one. When we translate the *flow of motivations* in terms of reasons, i.e. when we strive to grasp the logical structure behind our pre-reflective tendencies to act, we inevitably reduce the highly complex and miscellaneous mesh of motivating features into an abstract scheme of our acting. The ambivalence of our vital communication with the world is simplified, when I stand back from it in order to translate my being-moved into a set of beliefs, desires and explicit reasons. When I do this, "when I want to express myself, I crystallize a collection of indefinite motives in an act of consciousness" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 309). To grasp one's implicit motivations consciously, i.e. to translate non-thetic solicitations to move one's body into an explicit reason to act, has a price to be paid. In Mark Wrathall's (2005, 119) words, any attempt to reformulate one's motivated experiences into reasons "ends up focusing on some narrow subset of a rich and complex set of motives". For all these various points, motives are not entirely reducible to reasons.

So far, I have reappropriated for the purposes of my account of action the basic tenets of Dreyfus's original insights concerning embodied coping skills and their importance for guiding our various everyday performances. Now, it is time to critically assess the relevance of Dreyfus analysis for a more general and pragmatically oriented theory of human action. First, one might object from a Brandomian perspective that emphasizing subject-related motivations amount to discard the social dimension of acting that is crucial for its proper understanding. Second, one might wonder if Dreyfus' presentation of "absorbed coping" and "acting-in-the flow" as paradigmatic cases of action does not result in a flattened picture of human agency insofar as it appeals to cases of mere behavior. Finally, there is a suspicion that even our most basic bodily coping does not answer only to the demands of a given situation, but also involves

responsiveness to reasons, against Dreyfus's repeated claim.

The first worry concerns the way of making action intelligible while appealing to someone's personal and context-specific motivations. Since both perception of affordances and responsiveness to solicitations is subject-related, have we not lost the social dimension of acting emphasized by Brandom? One could rephrase Brandom's objection against monological accounts of action in the way that rejects the possibility of making sense of action within the space of motivations: privately felt motivations (analogically to privately held intentions) commit us neither to act nor to be accountable for our action, hence, they are not essential in bringing about the action, nor to make such action intelligible. In order to reply to this objection, we have to say more about the relation between bodily coping skills and habits.

In my view, the ability to experience salient aspects of a given situation is made possible by habits that we acquire mostly by repeated participating in structured practices, understood as patterns of appropriate action. Since our practical know-how about what to do and how to proceed is carried in and encoded in these practices, we can become sensitive to the rules of a game simply by taking part in it and learning from our co-actors' replies to our performances. Once we have incorporated the logic of a certain practice into our skills, we are able to reply smoothly to the situational demands without having to worry about these rules, at least most of the time. The primary locus of an agent's understanding thus lies not in her own representations, but in shared practices that form the background for her orientation and skillful coping within a variety of situations. Therefore, even though the agent's responsiveness to salient affordances stems from her own *felt* motivations, the sociality of her involved coping with the situation is guaranteed by her enculturated bodily habits and skills.

The sociality of our embodied coping is thus guaranteed by the way in which we acquire our skills and habits. Sometimes, "one learns the game by watching how others play it" (Wittgenstein 1953: 27). Such imitation of

exemplary conducts is never mechanical, but socially articulated: even when we learn our skills by merely imitating others, there is an element of social recognition involved in such a learning. Children spontaneously imitate their parents, university students unreflectively follow their professors' styles of reasoning and speaking, beginner dancers shape their skills through synchronizing their bodily movements, steps and posture with those of their more experienced partners and so on. Two remarks pointing beyond Wittgenstein are in order: while he acknowledges the plurality of possible introductions to the game, he emphasizes that mere watching might be enough. I would rather rephrase this point by saying that participation might be enough, insofar as physically putting oneself in different situations of the game allows the agent (unlike the mere spectator) to be guided by others via their bodily negative and positive feedback. Secondly, such an unreflective imitation is more than often accompanied by reflective critical assessment, where the social recognition plays an explicit role in enforcing the validity of the rules to be "blindly" followed. Only those who the novice recognizes as competent social actors are those whose consent matters to her when she strives to see herself acknowledged as acting correctly, that is, to be assessed her performance as fulfilling the norms of a given practice. When writing her first papers in philosophy, the novice practitioner searches to comply with demands of her peers, professors and not of her parents (unless they are themselves acknowledged experts in the field of humanities). Does she or her peers or professors evaluate the norms in terms of which she or them understand the required norms and skills? Only to a certain level and probably never in their entirety. One can always explicitly criticize any particular norm guiding one's conduct or any limited set of such interconnected norms, but one can never question all of them at once. Considering that there are potentially infinite manners in which philosophical ideas might be expressed (think about Socrates' provocations of his fellow citizen, Enlightenment pamphlets or Nietzsche's puns and aphorisms), there is probably some

blindness in almost everybody within academia following the prevailing style, rhetoric and structure of philosophical arguments to which one was raised.⁵ The point of this observation is not to criticize, as so many have already done, the evils of conformism, but an almost contrary claim: our tendency to conform our speech, thinking and behavior to shared practices is to be considered as the background condition of our capacity to think and act with others. Our explicit acknowledgement of rules is not necessary, quite the contrary: our unreflective conformity to rules is a necessary pre-condition of our conceptual skills. When interacting with others within an already rule-governed practice or game, we develop a non-conceptual feel about how to behave correctly and some fine-tuned understanding about the right adjustments to be made towards other participants moves. To be sure, merely imitating exemplary models does rarely transform the follower into an expert of her own, but it is an essential part for becoming a competent agent able to act in accordance with the requirements of the rule-governed social environment. The pragmatic lesson to be learned from these observations is that individual action depends on socially acquired habits and not the other way round, as if individual and single actions were the basis of all intelligibility, while habits would be relegated to mindless repetition of the same.⁶

The relation between habitual conduct, instantiated in absorbed coping, and intentional action is closely linked to the second concern to be raised about Dreyfus' analysis of *coping* insofar as it presents itself as an alternative theory of action *tout court*. An objection to such ambition might be formulated in terms of a traditional question concerning the difference between action

⁵ "Blindly" obeying the rules of the game thus amounts on my interpretation to knowing how to act correctly (and being in possession of respective embodied skill for telling the correct from the incorrect), even when one is not able to evaluate the validity, the explicit content and the reach of the norms to which one replies while partaking in a particular practice. This partial interpretation does not aim to give an exhaustive account of the rule-following problem in Wittgenstein, nor to engage with the massive amount of its extant readings.

⁶ For further development of the pragmatist Copernican revolution consisting of placing habits as grounds for all individual and intentional action, see Kilpinen (2009).

properly said and mere behavior. Does Dreyfus' account of what he calls "skilled action" deal with actions at all, or does it rather provide a phenomenological description of mere conducts? Most of the time, Dreyfus (2005, 2007, 2013) takes cases of driving around, acting-in-the-flow, exiting doors or keeping an appropriate distance in elevators to be paradigmatic cases of human agency. However, these and similar cases seem hardly suitable to illustrate the peculiar nature of human action, since they are mostly instances of everyday behavior. Dreyfus might answer that even when my actions are simply drawn and guided by perceived solicitations and inculcated requirements and constraints, they are still purposive and answerable to norms of appropriateness (as we have seen above). This should lead to the acknowledgment that intentional and deliberate actions are just a subset of larger family of purposive and normatively controlled action. Furthermore, Dreyfus (1991: 72) provides an explanation about the emergence of deliberate and intentional action from the background of our unreflective coping based on bodily skills and habits: when things go wrong and our fluid coping with a situation is disturbed or when we discover that our habitually employed skills are simply not enough to deal with an unexpected or otherwise problematic situation, we have to appeal to our capacity to deliberate about hidden (not immediately perceivable) possibilities to be explored in order to achieve our projects and goals. Dreyfus' account thus presupposes various types of actions that differ by the means deployed to guide our performance: "feeling of greater and lesser tension" when directly replying to perceived solicitations on one hand, and deliberation when dealing with recalcitrant or otherwise problematic situations on the other. Only in the latter case, the agent would have to appeal to rational assessment and articulated reasons. However, such division of action into "mindless" bodily coping and "minded" deliberation opens an unjustified divide within a single phenomenon. To my understanding, our habitual embodied coping is not deprived of rationality and conversely, our deliberate and intentional acting largely depends on enculturated

bodily habits and skills. Therefore, the answer to the objection concerning the illegitimate identification of action with "skillful coping" has to dwell on more arguments than Dreyfus' account can offer, while rejecting some of its shortcomings.

My final aim is to defend a continuity between practical reasoning (our capacity to justify our performances through reasons) and our embodied coping skills, that is overlooked or denied by both Brandom's intellectualist and Dreyfus' anti-rationalist accounts. While both authors introduce a gap between embodied coping skills and conceptual skills our discursive capacities, my claim is that our involved and embodied coping with the demands of a given situation entails responsiveness to reasons and conversely, all partaking in discursive practices can be seen as an extension of our bodily coping skills. To my eyes, Brandom and Dreyfus commit the same error, albeit from diametrically opposed perspectives. Brandom begins with linguistic practices and discursively articulated intentions and ends up providing a disembodied or only contingently embodied account of action, while Dreyfus proceeds from the bottom up, i.e. from our absorbed and mindless responsiveness to solicitations to singular episodes of rational deliberation or detached reflection, following breakdowns in our otherwise smooth and transparent coping with the world. Thus, they both neglect the extent to which our deliberation and reason-giving practices are part and parcel of our intra-subjective and bodily intentional transactions. The shared mistake behind these inverted accounts consists of thinking in bifurcated terms from the start. There is neither *ground-floor* of bodily absorbed coping nor an *upper story* of discursive articulation of reasons, but rather continuous relying on our bodily capacities to track changes, solicitations and affordances within the normatively rich social landscapes that is always already infused with instituted reasons and that frames all of our acting. In my subsequent attempt to undermine the unfortunate contrast between our perceptual/practical responsiveness to ambient solicitations and responsible action guided by reasons, I draw

on already existing criticisms of Dreyfus' prejudicial collapse of intentionally bodily agency into merely mindless coping. Many essays in both Schear's volume *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus debate* (2013) and Švec and Čapek's volume about *Pragmatic Perspectives in Phenomenology* (2017) reject a rather crude dichotomy between articulated reasoning and its supposedly "detached" attitude, on one hand, and absorbed, skillful and "mindless coping", on the other, that one finds in Dreyfus.⁷ The aim of my essay, however, is not to engage in the McDowell-Dreyfus debate about the extent to which conceptuality permeates all of human experience, but rather to point out the necessity of taking into account – for the sake of a pragmatist theory of agency – the normatively rich landscape that frames our responsiveness to seemingly immediate solicitations while we initiate, perform or redirect the course of our action.

Responsiveness to reasons in bodily and skillful coping with the situation

Unlike Dreyfus, I will claim that there are not two separate classes of action, but that the same acts are to be explained both by our practical commitments functioning as reasons for action and by our sensitivity to the unfolding demands of situation. At the same time, I am in complete agreement with him that agents do not have to form any representations of rules even if their actions are norm-governed by their partaking in shared practices. Moreover, I want to overcome Dreyfus by developing his own original and often overlooked claim in which he situates the rules in "the *landscape* on the basis which

skilled coping and reasoning takes place" (Dreyfus 2005, 53, my emphasis). This insight merits to be explored further than Dreyfus himself does. Rules to be followed are not in our heads (consciously or unconsciously), they do not have to be "internalized", since they are all around us in the instituted frameworks of intelligibility, shared practices, in the familiarity of the world to which we were introduced. It is therefore enough to remain responsive to the demands of a given situation, since our social environment as such is norm-governed and permeated with already instituted reasons. However, it also follows that Dreyfus is wrong in his repeated claim that involved and embodied agency does not appeal to reasons at all. He omits, first, that our embodied skills allowing us to master norms as solicitations and are depository of instituted reasons that proved to be worthy in the past. Second, he fails to acknowledge that the situation in which we can directly respond to perceived affordances without thinking is always already permeated with instituted reasons that belong to the "objective spirit" of the community, to use a Hegelian term, rather than to the skills of each of the individual actors involved. Our reflective and conceptual skills intervene on our habits to shape and to adjust them each time when they prove to be maladaptive or when they lead us to dead-end streets. Judgements and critical evaluations are then stabilized in a transformed set of socially shared habits allowing each member of community to cope anew unreflectively in a reconfigured situation.

Merleau-Ponty establishes a structural analogy between our orientation in a familiar surrounding based on our bodily habits and skills and our orientation in the world of thoughts on the basis of previously acquired judgements:

When I move about in my house, I know immediately and without any intervening discourse that to walk toward the bathroom involves passing close to the bedroom, or that to look out the window involves having the fireplace to my left. [...] Similarly, there is a "world of thoughts," a sedimentation of our mental operations, which allows us to count on our acquired concepts and judgments, just as we count upon the things that are there and that are given as a whole, without

⁷ However, none of these criticisms deals explicitly with the thorny issue of our actions' responsiveness to reasons, but mostly with the pervasiveness of concepts within our understanding and perceptual experience. A partial exception is McDowell's own essay "The Myth of the Mind as Detached" in Schear (2013) where McDowell argues against Dreyfus that all our acting, including its most absorbed and spontaneous kinds, are permeated with rationality. When it comes to questioning Dreyfus' dichotomy between bodily absorbed coping and discursive practices, I highly recommend Carl Sachs' chapter "Discursive Intentionality as Embodied Coping: A Pragmatist Critique of Existential Phenomenology" in Švec & Čapek (2017).

our having to repeat their synthesis at each moment (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 131).

We “count upon” a lot of things taken for granted without having to think about them, since our environment (both physical, social and linguistic) is permeated with coordinates that we learned to master through habit-acquisition. The point to be stressed is that our habit-formation not only runs in parallel with thought-sedimentation, but that these two processes are tied up.⁸ To my sense, taking into account our habit-formation through time and within a social environment that serves as depository for ready-made reasons provides the most promising path to close the gap between acting for reasons and responding to perceived solicitations. The passage from *Phenomenology of Perception* quoted above suggests that conceptual content is deposited in our habits in a form of sediment. It follows that, *pace* Dreyfus, our embodied openness to perceived affordances is permeated with sedimented or instituted rationality and that, *pace* Brandom, our capacity to reply reasonably to the shared norms is beholden to our learned and embodied habits and skills.

The sedimentation of reasons in the practices by which we inhabit our social world further explain why agents can act in accordance with rules while obeying them *blindly*, as Wittgenstein famously states in *Philosophical investigations* (1953, 85). Because we take the patterns of action embodied in shared practices for granted and reliable, our performance of action sticks with “the rules of the game” without being a conscious application of rules. Thanks to their embodied and enculturated sensitivity to salient coordinates, the agents act in accordance with the requirements of the rule-governed social environment. Each one of us, with the possible exception of the most severe cases of autism spectrum disorder, can be said to act as an “expert” (in Dreyfus’ sense of the “involved copier” immediately and

appropriately responding to solicitations) in one’s own social environment. Such dependence of our expert skills upon a background of familiarity goes unnoticed most of the time, but think how quickly we get “lost” when displaced in an unfamiliar environment, where we are obliged to proceed according to trials, errors and learning from our missteps and where we are trying to formulate provisional hypothesis about rules that we are supposed to follow. Merleau-Ponty’s structural analogy between moving in one’s own house and moving in the “world of thoughts” that we inhabit helps to make sense of our bodily *and* rational dependence upon available coordinates in the familiar environment.

In a similar vein to my account, Levine proposes to consider “our capacities for rational action as acquired capacities that develop in time due to a series of overlapping processes” (Levine 2012, 16). This runs against Dreyfus’ dissociation between bodily coping skills and responsiveness to reasons.⁹ Furthermore, Dreyfus’ illustrations and arguments for rejecting that absorbed coping involve any responsiveness to reasons are not entirely convincing. Consider his example of acting without any sensitivity or responsivity to reasons: “A door affords going in and out, and an observer can see that that’s why a person leaving the room goes out the door. But the involved copier does not act for that reason as such” (2007b, 361). To be sure, not all affordances are reasons for actions, so far I am in agreement with Dreyfus. However, in the example above, the door as affordance figures as a mere part of the whole situation, as an affordance, but not even a solicitation. Nobody, not even an intellectualist theorist of action, would equate this affordance with some reason for action, suggested in Dreyfus’ “that’s why”. In order to see where the real issue about involved responsiveness to reasons lies,

⁸ Berendzen (2010) rightly points out that these two processes, i.e. habit-acquisition and thought-sedimentation, are not independent from one another and running in parallel lines but support each other.

⁹ My paper is prolonging Levine’s (2012) own attempt to overcome the separation between rational capacities and bodily responsiveness to solicitations by taking into consideration the social genesis of our habits. To his account, I would add that our present embodied skills are depository of instituted reasons that proved to be worthy in the past. Furthermore, I want to use these insights to contest other shortcomings in Dreyfus’ theory of action that Levine mentions only in passing.

think rather about someone exiting the door on a harmful remark or offensive gesture made by her partner. Such an exit strategy would still be one of the “involved copier”, as opposed to the “detached observer”. At the same time, the solicitation to which she replied by going out was surely perceived by the copier herself as a reason propelling her to leave the room. Finally, such a strategy is not without ties with other inferentially related reasons: it is better to leave than to assault; the exit is to be perceived as an expressive gesture of someone concerned about conserving her personal dignity; it might leave some space for our partners’ quieter reassessment of a situation that was about to escalate, and so on. To put it starkly, the way in which we perform – no matter how hastily or unreflectively – our *exit strategy* is never an *exit from the space of reasons*.

Another example might illuminate our responsiveness to reasons in absorbed coping even more convincingly. Consider the insistence with which the dirty dishes “speak” to me from the sink where they were left, as if they begged me to be washed. In such cases, I unreflectively reply to a perceptual solicitation, without thinking about the reasons of my acting or the rules that I am following. Nonetheless, these reasons and rules exist and they were part of my acquiring the habit of washing the dishes shortly after their use. These reasons are mostly sanitary, they are tied up with societal and familiar demands about the cleanness of one’s habitat and they involve rules and normative assessments concerning how thoroughly and how quickly after their use one is supposed to wash the dishes. They have become embodied through my family upbringing while I was prepared for life under social conditions. We can see from these examples that at least some of our habits are acquired based on reason-giving practice. However, even when they are transmitted by repetition or imitation, there is a general *rationale* to stick with our habits and to follow them blindly: social coordination (I shall come back to the role of habits and reasons in the coordination of joint action in the concluding section below).

Continuity between sensitivity to solicitations and answerability to reasons

All these illustrations help us to see that it is a mistake to stipulate a stark contrast between acting for reasons and bodily skillful coping. We feel drawn or inclined to a certain course of action and simultaneously, we are more or less aware of reasons propelling us on such a path or direction. In fact, when we give an account of our acting, we often appeal to both *reasons for action* (our practical and explicitly acknowledged commitments) and to the way we *felt solicited* by opportunities, constraints or frustrations that we have met while executing our performance. It is worth to be noted, even though I cannot develop this point in detail, that in the justificatory accounts of our past action, our acknowledgement of responsibility appeals more often to reasons for action, while our effort to exculpate ourselves rather tends to emphasize our immediate reply to the most salient solicitations as main motivations of our conduct. This second strategy is not without a rationale of its own to the extent it appeals to solicitations and salient affordances of that I have previously identified as instantiations of socially instituted norms to which we are supposed to reply in an appropriate manner. At the same time, the recurrent mixture of both justificatory strategies in unified accounts further demonstrates that we should not conceive of reasons and motivations as belonging to independent realms, but rather as continuum with two ideally abstracted extremes of “pure reasons” and “unmediated replies to solicitations”. To put it simply, a large part of our actions are simultaneously accountable as motivated by perceived solicitations of the environment and done for reasons. The same point was raised by O’Conaill in order to soften the binary conception of “space of reasons” and “space of motivations” that one finds in Dreyfus: “If the agent feels drawn to act in a certain way and also acts in that way because it is in accordance with reason, then the action will be both motivated and rational.” (O’Conaill 2014, 449) Although I fully subscribe to O’Conaill’s conclusion that it is a mis-

take to think of spaces of motivations and reasons as “mutually exclusive”, my point is slightly different from his own: it is crucial not to conceive of “reasons” and “motivations” as two separate “items” producing in parallel my acting, as if one belonged to my mental capacities and the other to my bodily capacities. There is no animal nature in me, existing aside from my being rational, but rather constant transformation of my innate endowment through my adherence to social standards and instituted reasons. What motivates my behavior is thus not only translated, but also *transformed* when I appeal to solicitations and motivations in the account of my acting, that *ex definitione* belongs to the space of reasons and that has to answer to socially acknowledged frameworks of intelligibility.

The continuity between bodily coping and rational activity involved in our agency should not be understood as mere transition from fundamental layer of non-cognitive bodily responsiveness and higher layer of rational and discursive capacities. Such continuity should rather be considered in terms of mutual transformative relation between non-conceptual and conceptual, spontaneous and socially instituted, sentient and sapient aspects of human experience. In Brandom’s terms, there is a radical transformation of our “sentient” nature through our “sapient” skills, a point already raised against Dreyfus by McDowell (2007, 344), according to whom our acquisition of linguistic capacities thoroughly transforms the character of our embodied coping, “including the disclosing of affordances”. At the same time, we should not omit, as it happens to Brandom and McDowell, the constant and never completely overcome dependency of our conceptual and discursive skills on the bodily responsiveness to others, of which they are extension. Such a reciprocity is emphasized by Merleau-Ponty, for whom every aspect of human existence is simultaneously animal (sentient) and institutionalized (sapient), so that any clear-cut delimitation that we try to establish between the two supposed layers shows up, in final analysis, as arbitrary:

It is impossible to superimpose upon man both a primary layer of behaviors that could be called “natural” and a constructed cultural or spiritual world. For man, everything is constructed and everything is natural, in the sense that there is no single word or behavior that does not owe something to mere biological being – and, at the same time, there is no word or behavior that does not break free from animal life, that does not deflect vital behaviors from their direction [*sens*] through a sort of *escape* and a genius for ambiguity that might well serve to define man (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 195).

What is crucial in this long quote is the reciprocity between natural and constructed: to be sure, all biological impulses are transformed in human existence through being subject of societal demands, but also all conducts bear witness of their evolutionary origins and from the natural forces that first produced them. Our sexual conduct is thus both responsive to animal drives, perceived stimuli and solicitations and answerable to incorporated habits of conduct and reoriented by joint searching for all kinds of refined and consensual pleasures. The crucial point of this observation is that these two levels cannot be separated but *in abstracto*, since the supposedly “higher layer” has thoroughly modified our animal sexuality and changed the repertoire of our behavioral responsiveness to sexual signals, however without completely breaking free from our perceptual sensitivity to such solicitations. Corollarily, we are accountable for our actions even in cases where we might claim – often in bad faith or hypocrisy – that we merely followed our innate drives or animal nature.

An analogous consideration can serve against the split between rational and bodily capacities responsible for our agency, a split that is reminiscent of both body-mind and nature-nurture dualisms. The first step is to follow Brandom and locate reasons for action in discursive practices and not to some separated, mental realm of detached contemplation. In the second step beyond Brandom, it is crucial to acknowledge that discursive practices are embodied insofar as they require perceptual-practical skills of adjusting one’s conversational conduct to affordances and solicitations provided by our

interlocutors. Joseph Rouse (2015, 122) provides a naturalist argument for considering our linguistic skills as extensions of integrated bodily capacities. On his evolutionary account, our involvement in reason-giving practices thus presupposes “a practical-perceptual capacity for robust tracking of protolinguistic performances in their broader circumstances and for flexibly responsive performances (both linguistic and nonlinguistic) motivated by them”. Such practical-perceptual skills come into play each time when we have to coordinate our linguistic performances with our interlocutor’s demands, objections, silences and gestures. Our capacity to reply reasonably to our interlocutors and co-actors is thus beholden to our learned and embodied habits. Rouse’s entanglement of our discursive capacities within our perceptual and practical tracking of available solicitations is further developed by Carl Sachs in his attempt to explain our social practice of giving and asking for reasons in terms of highly specialized form of embodied coping. On Sachs’ (2017, 98) conception, we are bodily attuned not only to salient features of our surrounding, but also to the contents of each other’s assertions, questions or objections: “The pragmatic statuses of commitments and entitlements whereby we track propositional contents are themselves affordances and solicitations – they are affordances and solicitations for the rational animals that we are”. All these insights help us to overcome the intellectualist tendencies in Brandom and McDowell, whose concept of rationality is surely context-specific, but only contingently embodied.

With this correction, we can side with McDowell (1994, 85) against Dreyfus and claim that our embodied coping is indeed permeated with instituted rationality. Such rationality is not to be searched in individuals’ minds, but rather in community’s shared commitments. It opens a shared and argumentative space of available reasons for action that each member of the community can appropriate as her own when solicited to give an account of his conduct. Such shared space of available reasons was identified by Hegel in terms of “objective spirit” and by Merleau-Ponty as “the human space made

up of those with whom I discuss or of those with whom I live” (2012, 25). It is precisely as members of this instituted space of reasons that we are directly and immediately responsive to perceived affordances and solicitations. This supposedly “basic” responsiveness however is not a “fundamental layer” that we share with animals,¹⁰ but rather something continuously transformed through historically evolved norms of correctness, that are still ongoing subject of polemics arising from our sapient nature.

Conclusion: Acting Together in a Precarious World

In conclusion, let me summarize which insights about social and situational embeddedness of action might be gathered from this critical assessment of Brandom’s and Dreyfus’ accounts of agency. My aim was not only to compare their relative strengths and weaknesses, but mostly to use this comparison in order to better understand several important aspects that any pragmatically oriented theory of action should take into consideration: the open-ended character of the situation in which we act, the dialectics of action and milieu, the plurality of actors and the requirements of social coordination for acting in a precarious world.

Thanks to Dreyfus’ account of embodied sensitivity to ongoing solicitations, we are now in a position to better understand how an agent is able to realize her “Brandomian” practical commitments in order to make them true in a social world. We have seen that Brandom’s mistake is to understand our acting as causally and unilaterally dependent upon an acknowledged commitment: the performance of the action was seen as “exit transaction” from the space of reasons. Situational embeddedness of agency requires that the agent remains not only committed by the attitudes that she has endorsed, but also involved and open to whatever solicitations emerge within an ongoing situation. By focusing

¹⁰ Contrary to Dreyfus’ polemical claim directed against McDowell: “in their direct dealing with affordances, adults, infants, and animals respond alike” (2005: 56).

unilaterally on the responsiveness to publicly articulated reasons, Brandom omits our bodily sensitivity to the unfolding and diversely pressing demands of the situation itself.

What is missed is also “the dialectic of milieu and action”, to use Merleau-Ponty’s term (1966: 168–169), or the dynamic nature of transactions between the organism and the environment, pointed out by Dewey (1925). According to Merleau-Ponty, while our body moves in order to get a better grip on a situation, the phenomenal field is transformed in a way that allows us to disclose its previously hidden aspects and to adjust our performance accordingly. Similarly, Dewey emphasized a reciprocal relation between our acting and our undergoing the consequences of our action (1896: 358–359; 1925: 253). Since the solicitations of a milieu change while and because we act, much of our intelligent engagement with the world goes well beyond of what we can frame through representations while we deliberate or shape the intention upon which we act. Hence the need to constantly adjust our performance to new options available, while dealing with previously unforeseen recalcitrance of things. So even though it would be absurd to say that actions are not goal-directed, one should never forget to add that their goals or ends remain mostly indeterminate because of the re-configurations that are emerging in concomitance with our acting.

Furthermore, this open-ended character of the situation to which we belong and whose stakes outrun our current understanding is beholden to the plurality of actors involved. During the course of its performance, my acting is mediated by its interaction with other co-actors. Individualistic accounts of intentional action are simplistic insofar as they neglect each agent’s necessity to cope with the significance that others bring into a shared situation. The opportunities of further acting in the same direction might be foreclosed if relevant others refuse to second my proposal or initiative, as they might be enriched with new affordances brought by my partners, especially when they push me outside of my comfort zone. Dreyfus’ paradigmatic case of lonely driver,

virtuoso player, expert carpenter or kitchen chef are misleading if taken as illustrating essential features of human agency. As results from Arendt’s analysis in *Human condition*, it is a common mistake to theorize about action (*praxis*) according to the model provided by fabrication (*poiesis*). Conceiving of action in terms of fabrication completely misses the plurality of involved actors perceiving the common stakes or issues – *pragmata* in the sense of *things held in common* – from diverse and often contradictory perspectives.¹¹ Unlike the work (*poiesis*) of an expert carpenter who is in a position to predict and control the result of her activity, our true acting (*praxis*) has to cope with boundless consequences we can neither fully anticipate nor control.

For all these reasons, actors do not put in execution a plan they have already conceived from scratch (predicting each step leading from the current situation to a desired outcome). Rather, they commit themselves to initiate something new according to their current commitments and anticipations and then let themselves be involved in a Brandomian game where each of them has to reply to each other’s reply in order to better grasp the stakes involved from others’ perspective. This is because there is always a complex issue or stake in possible outcomes of an action, rather than an easily singled out end to be identified by the actor alone. The intralinguistic practice of giving and asking for reason, however, is not the only game in town, neither a self-sufficient way to appraise how one’s performance is perceived and how such perception affects its future outcomes. If the actor wants to see her initiative to be successful in interactive contexts and if she strives to get a better grip on its material implications, she has to remain sensitive to the manifold ways in which her performance affects the others in their hopes, frustrations, feelings of solidarity or reciprocal trust. In order to see the pragmatic limits of

¹¹ Arendt’s paradigm for action is the political action of citizens. To my sense, such a model fits much better than absorbed coping of a lonely carpenter with a piece of wood the peculiarities of human agency within an indeterminate and shared situation, where common future of diversely oriented actors is at stake.

reason-giving game in politics, consider the contemporary rise of populism, the hopes and frustrations upon which it dwells, how it undermines the trust in contemporary institutions, putting at stake the very meaning and future of liberal democracy.

This brings us to the final issue of the temporal structure of acting and its essential orientation towards unforeseeable future, from which its meaning will be determined. We have seen that what is at stake in action always outruns my current understanding, since the inferential and material implications of my initiative reach far beyond what I could possibly anticipate. Let us consider Gorbachev's program of reforms in the late 1980s from the perspective inspired by Brandom's inferential pragmatism. At the time of perestroika ("reorganization"), most members of the Communist Party as well as the few dissidents in the Eastern bloc were interested above all in Gorbachev's intentions, his sincerity and commitment to go on through with it, despite the opposition of his more conservative comrades. Only from the perspective of present day, we are in a position to understand the stakes involved in introducing several liberalizing reforms into a largely authoritarian regime, resulting in its complete dismantlement. On one hand, this observation confirms a point already established above: the meaning of an action can never be articulated only according to the actor's own intentions, but also involves its reappropriations by an irreducible plurality of co-actors. On the other, it points towards a larger problem: the meaning of an action is also the sum of its material consequences that the interaction between actors produced, even though *none* of them, nor *all of them* could have articulated such meaning at the time it was performed. When Gorbachev introduced perestroika and glasnost ("openness"), he began a new process and opened the way for a transformation of a state built upon the rule of a party, into a republic where singular voices can be heard, leaving at the same time more space for autonomy to other socialist countries. To be sure, the consequences of such achievements were entirely different from what he or any of other implicat-

ed co-actors intended. From the perspective of the present day, it is nevertheless possible to establish not only a chronological but also a logical or inferential link between his reforms and the subsequent disintegration of authoritarian regimes in the East.

What lesson might be learned and pragmatically formulated from this and previous examples emphasizing the social embeddedness of action? The first lesson consists of the reformulation of Peirce's pragmatist maxim in a way that is valid not only for clarifying our ideas or conceptions, but also for determining the content of intentions upon which we act: to ascertain the meaning of an intention, one should consider the sum of consequences resulting from the successful making-true of that intention. Second, such consideration of practical bearings is not something that the agent can do on her own: *what she shall do*, while acknowledging her intention to act, depends on socially structured normativity and is made explicit in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Third, because of the open-ended character of the situation, the actor also needs to rely during her performance on embodied skills, habits and sensitivity to most salient affordances that are disclosed while and because she acts (and not through merely intralinguistic reason-giving practices). Finally, because of the irreducible plurality of actors' standpoints and attunements, our actions point ahead of themselves towards stakes that are indeterminate from the perspective of the present day, so that neither the actor, nor her co-actors or impartial observers are able to establish the sum of outcomes in their complexity. This last lesson provides one more reason to think of action not according to belief-desire model, but rather as embodied coping with open-ended and ambivalent situations, while depending on clues provided by our shared background of practices.

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Contingency, uncertainty and ambiguity belong to our condition, as pragmatists from Dewey to Rorty have often emphasized. The situations in which we act are indeterminate and open-ended, our fellows might be-

have in unpredictable ways, and our intentions sometimes bring about the opposite of what we most sincerely hoped for. And yet, we cannot act without orienting our actions towards one another and towards a common future. This is a general *rationale* behind our following of the clues provided by our shared and embodied practices that put constraints on our joint acting and make us answerable to generalizable, even if continuously revisable set of norms.

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