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‘To Catch at and Let Go’:
David Bakhurst, Phenomenology and Post-Phenomenology

Abstract

This paper examines David Bakhurst’s attempt to provide a picture of ‘the kinds of beings we are’ that is ‘more realistic’ than rationalism. I argue that there is much that is rich and compelling in Bakhurst’s account. Yet I also question whether there are ways in which it could be taken further. *I introduce the discussion by exploring Bakhurst’s engagement with phenomenology and, more specifically, Hubert Dreyfus – who enters Bakhurst’s horizon on account of his inheritance of the philosophy of John McDowell. Whilst I recognise that Bakhurst’s encounter with Dreyfus demonstrates his* achievements *– over rationalism and over Dreyfus – I also suggest that it opens up certain questions that remain to be asked of his position on account of its conceptualism. These questions originate, not from a Dreyfusian phenomenological perspective, but from the post-phenomenological perspective of Jacques Derrida. Through appealing to key Derridean tropes, I aim to show why the conceptual idiom Bakhurst retains may hold us back from understanding the open nature of human thought. I end by considering what therefore needs to come – and what needs to be* let go *– in order to best do justice to the ‘kinds of beings we are’.*

I

In this paper, I should like to explore David Bakhurst’s attempt to provide us with a ‘more realistic’ picture of the ‘kinds of beings we are’ (2011; 2014; 2016). Throughout this project, Bakhurst works to defend his position against a potential charge of ‘rationalism’. One direction from which Bakhurst foresees such a challenge is phenomenological or, more specifically, Dreyfusian. Hubert Dreyfus comes onto Bakhurst’s horizon because of his inheritance of the philosophy of John McDowell. McDowell became involved in a well-known debate with Dreyfus over the question of whether human experience is conceptual ‘all the way out’. Through an appeal to the phenomenology of ‘everyday coping’, Dreyfus works to suggest that it is *not*, and claims that McDowell’s conviction (shared by Bakhurst) that it *is* leads to an unduly narrow conception of the human being. As well as being entertained by Bakhurst himself, the ‘McDowell-Dreyfus Debate’ continues to command much attention in mainstream philosophy. It is also invoked in recent commentary on Bakhurst's work in the philosophy of education.[i]

The Dreyfus-Bakhurst encounter will be the starting point for our discussion here, too. But this is not to say that I am seeking to 'resolve' the longstanding debate. Nor will I be attempting to rehabilitate a Dreyfusian-line of argument against Bakhurst. In fact, my purpose in this paper is not to negatively critique or 'defeat' Bakhurst's account at all – for I find much that is rich and compelling in the picture he presents. What I should like to do, however, is move through Bakhurst's response to Dreyfus in a way that illuminates his achievements – yet *at the same time* opens up certain questions that, in my view, stand to be asked of his position.

The questions I want to raise originate, not so much from a phenomenological perspective, as from a *post*-phenomenological reading. More specifically, they are informed by certain tropes from the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. I call Derrida's perspective '*post*-phenomenological' here so as to highlight the way that, contrary to what is sometimes supposed, Derrida's thinking is not widely obscurantist or relativistic, but rather shares the general phenomenological imperative to do justice to what is experienced *as* it is experienced. Put otherwise, Derrida – like phenomenologists, and like Bakhurst himself – is after a 'more realistic' picture of the 'kinds of beings we are'. Yet Derrida's thinking was also marked by an effort to move *beyond* certain limitations he perceived within phenomenological philosophy, on account of its failure to remain faithful to the project of setting aside metaphysical assumptions and attending to the 'things themselves'. I will not discuss Derrida's concerns with phenomenology further here. My focus is rather to show how a Derridean approach can open up some new questions for Bakhurst's position. Raising such questions will not, let me re-emphasise, mean that we seek to overturn his account. But it will open us to possible ways in which Bakhurst's picture of 'the kinds of beings we are' could be taken *further*. I am not sure if Bakhurst would want to follow us in these directions. I hope to demonstrate the value of *what comes,* however, if we allow such ways to be open.

II

Introducing Bakhurst

Let us start with Bakhurst's picture, and why he comes to engage with Dreyfus. Bakhurst begins his portrait in *The Formation of Reason* with a sketch of the human being as the 'autonomous agent' – one who is able to 'determine what to think and do in light of what there is reason to think and do' (p. 72). For Bakhurst, what is distinctive about the human mind is our ability, in all but exceptional circumstances, to believe and act in accordance with 'considerations that favour our believing and acting' (2014, p. 2).[ii] We are, to employ the well-known terminology, beings who are 'responsive to reasons' and who come, via a *Bildungsprozess,* to inhabit the 'space of reasons'.

Bakhurst turns to the philosophy of John McDowell to develop his account. One of the key features of McDowell's philosophy Bakhurst inherits is his commitment to conceptualism. This is the belief that human thought and experience is pervaded by conceptual content: it is conceptual 'all the way out'. Now, McDowell came to argue for this as a result of his desire to overcome the 'myth of the given': the traditional philosophical idea that human experience is grounded in a pre-conceptual sensible manifold, which is then organised and thematised by the understanding. Against this, McDowell suggests that our experiences of the world need to always already have the kind of content that can '"serve up" *reasons* for judgement, reasons *for* the judging subject' (Schear, 2013, p. 286). Such a conception informs Bakhurst's own depiction of what is at stake in our ability to be 'responsive to reasons', for 'it is only in virtue of its conceptual content that experience can bear directly on rationality and judgement' (2011, p. 177).

As far as accounts of the 'kinds of beings we are' go, what Bakhurst says here makes a contentious start. One reason for this is that McDowell's commitment to conceptualism has been the source of much debate. The origin of this is Hubert Dreyfus.

Introducing Dreyfus

Dreyfus takes exception to the claim that human behaviour and action is conceptual 'all the way out' on the grounds that it promulgates the 'myth of the mental' – thereby presenting an unduly narrow construal of the human being. Dreyfus' argument has been articulated and refined in various ways, and it will not be possible to do full justice to it here. The main feature of it, however, is the appeal to 'absorbed coping'. This is a mode of wordly comportment that Dreyfus articulates with the help of insights gleaned from certain phenomenological philosophers – most frequently Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Dreyfus' basic claim is that such behaviour (examples of which range from switching on a light, to making a cup of tea) presents a challenge to the conceptualist, precisely because the kinds of experiences they involve are free from conceptual content. To understand Dreyfus' claim here it is helpful to recognise that there is a tradition in philosophy of associating the 'conceptual' with possession of ideas or representations that are fully expressible and describable. This is the understanding of the 'conceptual' that Dreyfus adopts. Put otherwise, Dreyfus reads a commitment to conceptualism as a commitment to the idea that a deliberate and detached thinking process stands behind human behaviour and action. And it is for this reason that Dreyfus construes episodes of 'absorbed coping' as *non-conceptual* experiences. The player on the football pitch, as Dreyfus puts it, acts without her 'mind on' what she is doing; she is 'coping concretely without *thinking* at all' (2005, p. 12). Such episodes are free from conceptual content, then, because no articulated representations stand behind what is here 'directly lived' (2015, p. 17-18).

Dreyfus goes on to argue that such 'mindlessness' is not only a *contingent* feature of what happens in episodes of absorbed coping – it is, rather, a *necessary condition* of its happening at all. Turning our minds towards our actions would, after all, 'disrupt' the smooth execution of the activity. Furthermore, Dreyfus realises that engaged modes of behaviour are not only *occasional* happenings in our being-in-the-world – they are, rather, the more basic and everyday ways in which our relations to the world take place. Dreyfus therefore comes to affirm that such modes of engagement constitute the 'ground level' of our being-in-the-world: 'access to an *independent thinkable* world', he explains, 'requires as its background a *familiar graspable* world' (2013, p. 16).

Bakhurst's Reply

The central lever in Bakhurst's counter to Dreyfus is his claim that the phenomenologist has moved *too quickly* in jettisoning concepts from the sphere of absorbed coping. Put better, for Bakhurst, Dreyfus has moved *too traditionally* – for the kind of conceptualism *McDowell* adopts does not follow the narrow account of concepts we find in traditional philosophy, but embraces a *wider construal.* This means, *pace* Dreyfus, that McDowell (and Bakhurst who follows him) does not promulgate the mentalistic myth that 'the work of reason must be formal, abstract, situation-independent, rule-bound or otherwise "rationalistic"' (2011, p. 178).

In a recent paper, Bakhurst has used the example of a group of jazz musicians improvising together to demonstrate this point more fully. He introduces the example by echoing the Dreyfusian line that absorbed activity takes place *without* the accompaniment of articulate, formulated reasons. The jazz players, as he puts it, are simply 'in the groove'; they 'do not formulate and entertain their reasons prior to acting on them'. Nevertheless, Bakhurst adds, we should continue to see such behaviour as manifesting 'responsiveness to reasons', for it remains pervaded by conceptuality in a number of ways. Bakhurst explains:

> [T]hey understand themselves as engaged in a *performance*; as interpreting a *jazz standard* in a certain kind of *style*; as *soloing* or *harmonizing* or *accompanying* etc. Such concepts determine the unity and coherence of the activity and the standards by which their playing can measured … Of course, if the musicians are asked to give reasons for their musical decisions, their response need not take the form of an argument. They might simply cite some features of the situation that prompted her action ("The tempo was too slow"; "Jack needed a less busy accompaniment"). Or they might find it easier to demonstrate their reasons musically than to explain verbally. Moreover, there will be cases where the musicians are insufficiently articulate to express their reasons … But so long as we see their activity as guided by an appreciation of considerations that determine how it is appropriate to act, then we see their performance as manifesting responsiveness to reasons. (pp. 4-5).

Bakhurst appears to make two claims about the ways we might understand the conceptual nature of jazz improvisation here. Firstly, there is the claim that some sense of the nature of 'performance'; of 'soloing'; or of 'accompanying' needs to be at work in order for the jazz players' improvisation to be possible *as* jazz improvisation – certain concepts need to be in play order to make the jazz players' improvisation possible in the first place. Secondly there is the claim that, nevertheless, such concepts do not need to be 'in play' in any *explicit* manner (either during or after the performance); we can ascribe conceptual competence to the jazz players even though, when asked to explain their musical decisions in the performance, they are not able to offer fully articulated syllogisms about the way they proceed. Indeed, Bakhurst goes so far as to claim that we can ascribe it *even if* the players are themselves 'insufficiently articulate' to express reasons at all.

It is worth registering that Bakhurst's claims at this point draw upon McDowell's notion of 'demonstrative' concepts: an expanded idea of concept possession whereby, as Peter Poellner puts it, 'what is sufficient for justifiably ascribing possession of a concept to a subject ... is a referential and recognitional capacity' (2003, p, 38). The basic idea is that conceptual competence can be manifest in ways that go beyond verbal and representational articulation. Thus, for example, while I might not have the term 'crimson' as part of my verbal repertoire, if I am able to show facility in other ways (say, by pointing correctly to *this* shade of colour) I can be said to be in possession of the concept. Concepts, as Bakhurst himself puts it, can be manifest 'in the doing' of an activity; they are not solely the constituents of the propositional domain.

Does Bakhurst get the better of Dreyfus here? I believe so. Yet it is important to be careful about what I am claiming here. As I stated in the introduction, I am not aiming to 'resolve' the longstanding debate between Dreyfus and conceptualism (Bakhurst's or McDowell's) in the present paper. I am interested in the Bakhurst-Dreyfus encounter, rather, for the way it brings to light some of the *advances* in Bakhurst's position – over rationalism and over Dreyfus – and, at the same time, opens up certain *questions* that remain to be asked of it. Having now sketched the outline of the Bakhurst-Dreyfus debate, let us start to unravel this double thread a little further.

III

Expansions and Advances

Let us start with the positives. Bakhurst's response to Dreyfus is a compelling one. By making the move to 'expand' our understanding of the terms 'concept' and the 'conceptual' Bakhurst suggests that a conceptually driven construal of human beings as 'responsive to reasons' can, *pace* Dreyfus, present a rich and broad depiction of 'the kinds of beings we are'. Moreover, Bakhurst works to imply that Dreyfus is *himself* thinking too narrowly – or too *rationalistically* – when he expels concepts from the realm of absorbed coping. Indeed, when read against Bakhurst's more detailed illustration, Dreyfus' claims that episodes of absorbed coping take place in an 'unthinking' and therefore conceptually devoid sphere may well start to look somewhat simplistic. And it is perhaps worth registering at this point that when Dreyfus talks about the 'mindless' nature of absorbed coping, as Peter Poellner (2003 pp. 48–49) points out, this seems to involve not only the idea that there is no *thematic* awareness of the specific activity being engaged in (for example, playing *jazz* or feeling *sad*), but that there is no awareness of the 'experience of acting' *itself* (of *playing* or *feeling as such*). Dreyfus' depiction of absorbed coping, as 'mindless' could, then, be read in a strong – and potentially *strongly problematic* – sense.

It is possible that Bakhurst (and we) are being a little unfair to Dreyfus here, however. Playing jazz is a highly complex activity, which requires engagement on a number of levels (although not a type of detached ratiocination, as Bakhurst has aptly shown). Yet Dreyfus' discussion of absorbed coping seemed to centre on more basic, 'everyday' activities – such as hammering a nail, turning on the kettle, or opening a door. It concerns, that is, the type of engagement Heidegger depicts as 'ready to hand' – in which the kind of intellectual conditions Bakhurst is able to invoke in his jazz playing example are neither as rich nor, perhaps, as compelling.

Nevertheless, it remains questionable whether Dreyfus' account of absorbed coping – even when understood as embracing only our more everyday, 'ready to hand' activities – is adequate. Indeed, many commentators who are sympathetic to a phenomenological perspective have critiqued Dreyfus' account, particularly due to his portrayal of absorbed coping as a 'mindless' activity.[iii] Let me outline one way in which this concern could be articulated. Recall that Dreyfus wants to combat the rationalistic picture that behind human thought and action there stands deliberate and detached reasoning processes. To do this, he claims there is a sphere of absorbed coping wherein our experiences are 'directly lived' and we engage with the world 'without *thinking* at all'. Dreyfus comes to position these as the 'ground level' of engaged coping, and states that 'thinking' goes on in the 'conceptual upper stories of the edifice' (p. 19-20). By and through this move, however, Dreyfus seems to imply that the kind of deliberate and detached thinking processes he objects to are not problematic *in themselves* – they are just not present in the sphere of absorbed coping. Put otherwise, while Dreyfus casts ratiocination as a *less pervasive* mode of human experience (engaged coping is, after all, the 'ground level'), it still, nevertheless, pervades *somewhere* (in the 'conceptual upper stories'). My worry is that this leads Dreyfus to promulgate certain rationalistic assumptions in spite of himself. For what grounds do we have for assuming that we should expel 'thinking' from the realm of absorbed coping? Such a conclusion only follows if we equate thinking with (a traditional view of) forming abstracted and detached representations. It only follows, that is, if we continue to cleave to an intellectualist and mentalistic image of thinking. But this is to give thinking over to the rationalist. More specifically, it is to grant the rationalist *their* picture of thinking and to fail to see, beyond this, the possibility of any alternative.

Bakhurst's approach seems to me to fare rather better. For Bakhurst appears to recognise that what is needed to defeat the rationalist is an enriched, 'more realistic' account of rational thought *itself.* Yet Bakhurst also allows a central role for concepts and the conceptual within his alternative. It is through his expanded idea of concepts, we might say, that Bakhurst comes to present his expanded account of the mind. Let us now turn to say something about this feature in Bakhurst's account more directly.

Questioning Concepts

The way Bakhurst reads the 'conceptual' is, as we saw above, non-traditional. Perhaps we might say it is artful.[iv] The traditional way of thinking about concepts in philosophy is, as we also noted above, in terms of representations that are fully expressible and describable. More specifically, the notion of 'concepts' is often associated with general terms and general ideas. 'At least part of what this means', as Simon Glendinning (2000, p. 276) points out, is that 'we must relate to them as having an identity which is independent of any particular occasion of their use'. In other words, talking about concepts is conductive to an *abstract* way of thinking. Indeed the whole point of a 'general idea' or 'general term' in traditional philosophy is that we achieve it by abstracting away from specific instantiations of objects and forming a more general thought (of a triangle, for example, or a shoe). Furthermore, as Glendinning goes on to note, it becomes 'very tempting' once we go down this path to construe someone's possession of a concept in terms a 'mental grasp' of a form or identity that is fully contained and anticipated in the present (2000, p. 276). Hence to say that someone possesses a concept, on a traditional reading at the very least, gives the impression that they are in possession of something definite and stable, firm and fixed. After all, the term 'concept' in German is *Begriffen* – which connotes the idea of a grip and a hold, of catching and containing.

My intention in mentioning all of this is not to build up to the claim that Bakhurst's more artful sense of concepts and the conceptual is surreptitiously a full-blown, traditional form of conceptualism. Neither do I mean to suggest that, owing to its heritage, all talk about concepts and the conceptual is problematically outdated and should be done away with. What I should like to question, however, is whether, given the connotations that come along with such talk in philosophy, the language of concepts and the conceptual is itself the best way to get clear about the 'the kinds of beings we are'. More strongly, the question I want to pose is whether Bakhurst's retention of the conceptual idiom – *even in the more expanded form he embraces* – obscures some of the ways in which our thinking and experiencing the world gets going.

This is a claim that needs to be handled carefully, and we will spend some time exploring it in the sections that are to come. Let us begin here with a brief reference to Wittgenstein – possibly a more familiar figure to Bakhurst, for reasons we shall come to see in a moment. In his 'Consideration of Rule-Following' Wittgenstein examines the problems with the traditional philosophical idea that knowing how to follow a rule is a matter of having some explicit thought or formula in the mind, running alongside the activity. For Wittgenstein, such an assumption is at best peculiar, and at worst a *philosophical distortion,* not in the least because it is contradicted by the way rule-following happens in daily life. I see an arrow pointing left and I turn that way; I want to move this wheelbarrow of compost from one end of the garden to the other, so I pick up the handles and push. No interior monologue accompanies my undertaking of such activities – *this is simply what I do.*

Now, we might be tempted at this point – as Dreyfus perhaps would be – to say that we thus follow rules 'unthinkingly'. Yet Wittgenstein himself questioned such a move, recognising that it is made out of the habit of associating thinking with that deliberate, detached way of cognising favoured by the rationalist. Rather than take such a route, Wittgenstein adopts a subtler – and more radical – approach. For he argues that rule following is *itself* a form intelligent behaviour – even though, to employ Lee Braver's phrase, it involves 'a form of intelligence that doesn't look like what we expect thinking to be' (2012, p. 140). The gestalt switch Wittgenstein calls for is achieved by re-thinking intelligent behaviour as conditioned, not by some inner phenomenon, but rather by *contexts, conventions* and *practices.*

Without going any further with Wittgenstein, let us note some points of connection with Bakhurst that, I think, may come through here. For, Bakhurst's discussion of jazz playing, on one level, comes close to offering a kind of Wittgensteinian argument. Indeed, Bakhurst himself gestures towards the *contexts* and *conventions* that enable jazz playing to go on – he talks, we may recall, of the need for the jazz players to have a sense of 'soloing'; of 'harmonising'; of what it means to be 'improvising'. Now, Bakhurst portrays such conventions in *conceptual* terms: they are construed as part of the (broadly understood) conceptual content necessary for the experience of playing jazz. Yet it is interesting to note that, for Wittgenstein, conventions and practices can proceed in a host of different ways – many of which are *unforeseen.* Rule following, put otherwise, is open to development. It is precisely for this reason that any explanation of how to follow a rule will itself be open-ended and partial; as Charles Taylor puts it, 'every explanation leaves some other potential issue unresolved' (1997, p. 166). Conventions and practices might make possible our rule following, then, but they should not to be thought of as securing a certain way of going on. There is we might say, an 'openness' – that is there in the conditions for our rule-following behaviour and also in the ways we come to follow rules. Is this openness present in Bakhurst's conceptually driven account? Perhaps we are asking this question too soon. To approach it more gradually, let us now turn to Derrida.

IV

A Post-Phenomenological Perspective

Notably, the turn we want to introduce at this stage in our discussion could have been made by re-reading Bakhurst himself. More specifically, it could have been introduced by looking again at Bakhurst's argument for the conceptual nature of jazz playing. This, we may recall, concerns the way the jazz players are able to give an account of why they went on in the way they did. Because it makes sense to ask the jazz players to explain their musical decisions, and because the players are themselves able to give reasons for their actions, Bakhurst suggests, we should see their behaviour as being 'permeated with the conceptual' (2011, p. 177).

On the surface, what Bakhurst says here supports his 'official position': that conceptualism is broader than rationalism. When read in light of this, Bakhurst's claims that the jazz players may only give accounts that are vague; may only show their reasons demonstratively; and may not even be able to articulate their reasons at all seems to be an attempt to do justice to the broader and more concrete ways in which we manifest our rationality. Yet a question can be asked about the *status* Bakhurst accords to the non-explicit kinds of explanations invoked here, which makes matters rather more complex. Notably, while the answer is somewhat tacit in his discussion of the jazz players, it comes to the fore clearly in Bakhurst's fuller reflection on non-explicitness and inarticulacy in *The Formation of Reason*. Here, Bakhurst aligns himself with the McDowellian claim that, while it might not be the case that 'the subject must already be able to put it into words', the fact remains that human experiences 'must be the sort of thing that *can be* entertained in thought and encompassed by language' (2011, p. 189). Of course, such a commitment relates to the wider basis of Bakhurst's conceptualism – the idea that human experiences must be always already thematised by the understanding. For Bakhurst, then, all must be conceptualisable *in principle,* even though it may not be in fact. Read in the light of this, however, we come to recognise that when Bakhurst talks about moments of being non-explicit and inarticulate, he understands these in what can be called a 'contingent' sense. Put otherwise, the inarticulacy and non-explicitness invoked in Bakhurst's account has the status of being *not-yet-articulate* and *not-yet-explicit.*

Prima facie this might not look like a very significant point. But a Derridean perspective makes possible an *alternative* understanding of the notions of inarticulacy and non-explicitness – which goes beyond the sense of the 'not-yet-articulate' or the 'not-yet-explicit'. As Simon Glendinning puts it making a related point, Derrida's thinking embraces 'a sense of indefiniteness', which is 'not just an occasional or 'pragmatic' eventuality', but is rather '*internal* to the sense of words as such' (2000, p. 274-276). Of course, Glendinning's phrasing refers us to the way that Derrida's alternative gets developed in the context of a discussion about language. It may be difficult for us, then, to see how such a perspective bears directly on our concerns – for Bakhurst's account does not (explicitly) deal with questions of language. Yet we would miss the point of Derrida's philosophy if we took his account to have implications *only* for questions of language (something Glendinning himself shows). Such claims might, at this stage, look rather vague and ambitious. In what follows, we need to show how we can take them seriously.

A Turn to Language

It may be helpful to introduce Derrida's position by way of a contrast to traditional philosophical depictions of language as a vehicle – 'a means of transport … of a *meaning,* and moreover of a *unified* meaning' (Derrida, 1988 [1972], p. 1). Such 'representationalist' accounts have an established philosophical pedigree. Aristotle, Augustine and then Locke laid the foundations with their conception that language 'translates' thoughts (private, inner contents), and 'transports' them from one person to another. Derrida notices that such construals have been drawn in the light of what appears to happen with phonetic signs (speech acts), whereby the necessary presence of a speaker and listener enables the direct and immediate communication of thought. Yet this representational function also comes to be extended to graphic signs (written words) – with notably negative results. For the distinctiveness of the written mark lies in the fact that it can function when the original speaker and listener are *not* present. The written mark therefore lacks the immediacy and directness of the spoken word.

Now, on account of this, the written mark introduces ambiguity and indeterminacy into our language use – of the kind illustrated in Terry Eagleton's well-known example of the sign 'Dogs Must Be Carried on the Escalator' (does this mean, for example, that if you have a dog you must pick it up when travelling on the escalator? Or does it mean you have to have a dog before you are even allowed to board the escalator?). While Eagleton's example is an amusing one, Derrida points out that philosophers have been less than amused. In writing, words are interpretable, translatable, and readable in new ways. The possibility of such ambiguity and openness has led philosophers to profoundly *mistrust* writing.[v] If we view language as serving only a representational role, we can understand why. For, if meaning is not communicated faithfully, then language appears to be failing its 'true' purpose. The written mark therefore becomes suspect: 'not a guise for language, but a *disguise'* (Derrida, 1976 [1967], p. 35).

In his own account, Derrida seeks to overturn the philosophical mistrust of writing by challenging the very conception of language it is built upon. This is the motivation behind Derrida's well-known saying 'there is nothing outside the text' – a claim that has been read as wildly contentious, but on one level attests to the way that meaning is not secured via some inner, intentional content but rather depends on contexts, conditions and conventions. Of course, Derrida is not alone in making such claims. Wittgenstein, for example, similarly challenged the view that words get their meaning from being attached to ideas, and argued instead that 'meaning is use'. From what we have already seen of Wittgenstein in this paper, this should not come as a surprise. There is a clear relation between Wittgenstein's anti-representational account of language and his anti-intellectualism – both are ways of challenging the tendency to 'metaphysicalise' and posit private, inner contents behind what we say and do. Certain lines of connection between our present discussion of language and our earlier discussion of the nature of rational thought hereby come into view. But let us remain with Derrida a little longer.

Iterability

A central feature in Derrida's alternative picture of language is 'iterability'. Through this, Derrida refers to the way that words can be repeated and put to use in new and different contexts. We already noted this 'reusable' feature of language above, and we can now say more specifically that such ambiguity and indeterminacy comes about as a result of the *iterable* structure of writing. *Only* writing? A question emerges here, for *spoken* words also have this feature. Indeed, repeatability seems to be part and parcel of what makes a sign a sign; to invoke Simon Glendinning, 'it is simply *inconceivable* that something should be, say, a word and yet not be capable of being repeated again in new contexts' (2000, p. 276). The suggestion here is not simply that words are, by some contingent empirical fact, capable of being re-used on other occasions. The claim is rather that reusability is *a constitutive feature of signs being what they are*. To use Derrida's phrasing (1976 [1967], p. 50), it is the nature of the sign 'not to be proximate to itself', but to refer *beyond* itself to a system of signs which themselves refer on to other signs, which themselves refer on to other signs, which themselves refer on... The absence that is traditionally taken as a trait only of the written mark thus comes to be seen as a feature of *all language*. All language, is originally *writing*.

Important consequences follow. Insofar as language is originally *writing*, there is always something that *overflows* any present act of communication: a 'non-saturation' of the sign. What we say is thus never articulated with complete explicitness, definiteness and disambiguity. This does not mean, crucially, that nothing is ever articulated; nothing can ever be made explicit (a sceptical claim). Neither does it mean that things can be articulated or made explicit in any old way we like (a relativistic claim). But it does lead us to re-think what is at stake in acts of explicit articulation. For any *present* use of language is conditioned by and through its 'necessary structural relation to an iteration that is another such event which is *not present'* (Glendinning, 2000, p. 282). Thus the *conditions of possibility* of explicit articulation are at the same time the conditions of its *impossibility*. Language, to use Gordon Bearn's terms, 'broaches and breeches' (1998, p. 75). Could (and would) Bakhurst consent to such a picture? What would be the implications of his doing (or not doing)?

(Re-)Questioning Concepts

Let me try to explain why I think we have reason to ask such questions. This relates to the concerns I introduced above, regarding the conceptual idiom. Part of my worry is this: when we talk about human thinking in conceptual terms – whether we take this in an 'expanded' sense *à la* Bakhurst or not – we seem to continue a commitment to *an idea(l) or norm of articulation and explicitness.* This might be contentious, but I think such a commitment can be seen in Bakhurst. For, as we saw above, despite his suggestion that conceptual competence can be manifest 'non-explicitly', and despite the fact he recognises we can be 'insufficiently articulate' to give reasons for our actions, it remains the case for Bakhurst that such experiences *could* be made articulate and explicit (if the conditions were more favourable). Put otherwise, all those kinds of experiences that Bakhurst wants to embrace with his (broader) notion of conceptual competence remain the kinds of things that *could* be 'conceptualised'. Yet this is precisely the idea(l) that the argument for iterability calls into question. For, following Derrida's account, whatever is grasped or made explicit is only done so *partially* and *incompletely,* and on the basis of a modification of a more general inarticulacy and non-explicitness. Derrida's account therefore leads us away from understanding inarticulacy and non-explicitness *within the horizon of a norm of explicitness or articulateness* (against which inarticulacy and non-explicitness are understood 'contingently'). What it takes us towards is the notion that, qua iterable units, whatever is articulated and made explicit is so on the basis of a modification of *a more general inarticulacy and non-explicitness.*[vi]

I want to go a bit further with my worries here. For I should also like to question whether a commitment to a norm of explicitness and articulation itself harbours a commitment (maybe only tacitly, maybe only residually) to the grip and the grasp – which we identified as thematics of the more traditional way of understanding the 'conceptual' in philosophy. Let me introduce this via another example. A number of 'Romantic' writers, going against the abstract, intellectualised model of the human being dominant in their time, turned to privilege the *body* as our mode of relation to the world ('O for a life of sensation rather than thought!'[vii]). But a problem could be seen here. For the inversion attempted did not serve to displace the underpinning assumptions of the view the Romantics were trying to challenge. Put otherwise, a re-orientation towards the body works to repeat, albeit on a different level, the belief that there is or needs to be a higher sanction through which 'humanity' can be verifiable (not 'Reason' but the 'Body'). Now, earlier in this paper we agreed that Bakhurst makes advances over Dreyfus insofar as he does not commit to straightforward binarisms. Bakhurst, we said, recognises that what is needed to get beyond rationalism is not an appeal to 'unthinking' – but a reformulation of *what rational thought itself consists in.* I readily recognise this. Yet I also wonder whether Bakhurst could be read as making a problematic inversion on another level – not concerning thinking, but concerning *concepts.* For Bakhurst wants to replace the 'narrow' view that concepts are the constituents of deliberate and detached thinking, with the 'expanded' view that we can manifest concepts in 'the doing'. Yet his doing so could be seen as leaving in tact the underpinning assumption of (narrow) conceptualism: that things *can* be brought to full articulation and explicitness. Put otherwise, he could be seen as retaining the idea (maybe only tacitly, maybe only residually) *that what we ideally want or need are understandings and explanations that are definite and stable, firm and fixed.*

We might be feeling a little uneasy about making such claims against Bakhurst on the basis of the arguments we have rehearsed thus far. Indeed, what we have seen from Derrida has provided us with an interesting picture of how language works – but how can we move from here to make bigger claims? In the next section, we will come to develop these ideas further. For now it is perhaps worth simply saying that, at the very least, a conceptual idiom risks looking insufficiently sensitive to the possibilities – and *impossibilities* – through which our thinking gets going in the first place. It risks an account of the 'kinds of beings we are', that is, which fails to do justice to the openness we have come to approach through the iterability of the sign.

V

'The Space of Reasons' and the Text

The transition we are seeking to make at this point – viz. to explore the implications of the post-phenomenological account of language for Bakhurst's position – may be helped by an initial appeal to Heidegger. In his early philosophy, Heidegger presents us with a picture of human being-in-the-world that seeks to get beyond the construal of the human being as a disengaged 'subject' who faces passive 'objects' in the word. A key part of Heidegger's account is his notion of the 'background'. This attests to the contexts or horizons through which our relations to the world are made possible. We come to things, as Heidegger puts it, with a 'fore-having' and a 'fore-sight' – things do not appear to us as abstracted singular 'objects' but as shaped and formed by history, and as always already interpreted within a web of possibilities. Notably, there is an overlap between what Heidegger says here and the kind of position developed by Bakhurst. As we saw earlier, part of what Bakhurst claims about the conceptual nature of absorbed behaviour bears relation to the Wittgensteinian claim that what we do always takes place within a context, in light of certain conventions and in line with certain practices. This already sounds somewhat like a Heideggerian 'fore-having' and a 'fore-sight', but there is more to be said. For Bakhurst's claims about the contextual conditions here reflects his broader commitment to offering a 'socio-historical' account of the 'kinds of beings we are' – one that positions human beings within culturally and historically structured (and, in turn, modified) 'space of reasons'. As Paul Standish has observed (2016a, p. 107), Bakhurst's development of this (originally Sellarsian and McDowellian) notion has many traits that could be fruitfully compared to the Heideggerian conception of the 'world'.

Yet, as Standish also recognises, Heidegger enacts a 'turn' in his later work, by moving to consider more fully the place of *language* in human being-in-the-world. Heidegger's early analyses of the 'background' had of course included a place for language (how could they not?) – and here we note another point of connection to Bakhurst, for whom language is a key aspect of the socio-historical 'space of reasons' we come to inhabit. Yet Heidegger's later work comes to think about language in more directly *productive* terms. Hence Heidegger's oft cited phrase that '*language* speaks' – which is suggestive of both the way we as humans speak language and how language *speaks through us.* Beyond its signifying function, then, Heidegger seeks to draw our attention to the 'poetic' element of language – its capacity for 'letting be' (*Dichtung*). Now, Bakhurst never speaks about language in these exact terms, but I suspect he would not be too worried about according a productive role to language in the 'space of reasons'.[viii] Yet Heidegger's turn to language involves more than this, for what he is claiming here is not just that language is a productive *part* of the background, but that it *is* the background itself: ‘language is the house of Being: in its home man dwells’ (2010 [1947] p. 145). Put otherwise, Heidegger sees language as the condition of possibility for the coming to be of things in the world in the first place. As Timothy Clark explains it, language is ‘not merely an entity upon the *stage* of the world, *it is that stage*, that “space” in which alone things become apparent’ (p. 29, italics in the original).

When Derrida discusses language he follows Heidegger’s lead – but also takes him further. There is not the space to offer a full analysis of Derrida’s relation with Heidegger on this point, but perhaps a key aspect to foreground is the former’s concern that the latter is ‘too pious’ in his characterisation of language as ‘letting be’. At the risk of simplifying matters, we might see Derrida’s concern here as stemming from the sense that, despite moving beyond the traditional account of language in many ways, Heidegger himself overlooks the very *iterable* structure of language we have just explored. As Christopher Norris puts it, ‘[Derrida] wants to insist that all thinking about language, philosophy and culture must henceforth be conceived within the context of a massively extended “writing”’ (1987, p. 21). And this means, crucially, that any unconcealment through language always itself take place within a ‘double movement’ of broaching and breaching. Extending Clark’s earlier metaphor, it means that the ‘stage of appearing’ is one that is ‘ itself touched by the necessity of re-presentation’ (p. 122).

It is important to be clear that the ‘re-presentation’ referred to here is not the ‘representation’ of traditional philosophy (that which reflects something already there, in itself, prior to language). The image is rather, to borrow Clark’s terms again, of a mirror facing inwards (not outwards) – hence casting a multiplicity of reflections, inflections and traces.[ix] And this means that whatever is ‘here now’ comes to be understood as dependent on what cannot be ‘here now’, which mediates and conditions its ‘present’ character. Another way of putting this is to the say that the context in which we live our lives, following Derrida, comes to be understood as a *textual* space. For just as a literary text, to be what it is, must bear ‘a whole network of articulated themes and assumptions whose meaning everywhere links up with other texts, other genres or topics of discourse’ (Norris, 1987, p. 26), so too are our lives lived within the horizon of a more general ‘text’ that is open to further correlations, connections and contexts. And there is ‘nothing outside the text.’

'Responsiveness to Reasons' and Responsibility

What we have just said has taken us quite far into some of the most difficult aspects of Derrida's philosophy, and we have moved quite quickly. Perhaps in doing so we have left the kinds of points we want to make here – about Derrida, about Bakhurst and about the 'kinds of beings we are' – too implicit. But we can say these things more slowly and more directly.

Let us return to Bakhurst's leading notion of 'responsiveness to reasons'. We know that this should not be understood narrowly. Bakhurst's notion does not commit all human thinking and experiencing to 'the province of rule-following or inference', whereby I recognise that certain propositions or states of affairs in the world give me reasons for believing something or acting in a certain way (2011, p. 177). Pursuing a discussion of this elsewhere in *The Formation of Reason*, Bakhurst points to what goes on in the moral domain to depict the alternative kind of conception he is after. I notice a man struggling to put his shopping bags into his car and I offer to help him. My doing so is not based on any abstract calculation of propositions. Rather, Bakhurst suggests, it is based in my capacity to 'see' or 'intuit' what the present situation demands from me. Hence our reason responsiveness does not always – or indeed *mostly* – involve formulating articulate propositions upon which we then infer or calculate what to do. Rather than via the model of inference, we are better understanding reason responsiveness as a 'kind of perceptual capacity' (p. 176).

What Bakhurst says here helps to give expression, once again, to his intention to defend a broad picture of rational thought. Human beings are not standing back and detachedly surveying the world in Bakhurst's account – we are being *responsive* it and to what it suggests for our behaviour. Notably, however, Bakhurst later moves to emphasise how perceptual acts must themselves be understood as conceptual acts with conceptual content. Bakhurst justifies this on account of McDowell's argument concerning the possibility of sense perception as such (his rejection of 'the given'). But I wonder, yet again, whether the language of concepts has allowed something to get away from us here. The richer sense of worldly comportment that Bakhurst seeks to invoke in his appeal to moral thinking seems constrained by the conceptual bounding. And, indeed, perception has itself been taken as a model for precisely the kind of grasp and grip of the world that we found in the traditional view of concepts.

Notably, when trying to characterise a form of receptivity that gets beyond limiting models of thought, Heidegger developed a thematic of *listening*. Derrida, perhaps with an eye on the potentially still-too-pious overtones in Heidegger's construal, prefers to talk in terms of *reading*. Of course, the kind of a 'reading' Derrida invokes is not suggestive of some kind of immersion into a great body of texts. He is not advocating 'reading' for the purposes of cultural assimilation. What Derrida says here does relate to the practice of reading *literature*, however – insofar as this is understood as a practice of learning to become attentive to *language*. Let me elaborate a little more. When we read a poem or a text, we engage in a process of interpretation. Part of what this involves, of course, is trying to work out what a poem means or says to us. But we would be quite inadequate readers of literature if we thought of this in terms of a process of standing 'opposite' a poem or text, turning it over, peering inside, looking at it from all angles, in order to gain a fully comprehensive understanding. It is a careless and unscrupulous reader who thinks she grasps a poem or text without remainder. This is not simply a negative claim regarding literature's resistance to meaning. It is rather to say something about the very nature of what literature, and our 'reading' of literature, is. For we do not come to poems and texts from a position of mastery and domination - there is a space around a poem and a text that overflows and resists any attempt at final interpretation. This 'space of literature' serves as a metonym for the more general 'space of language' that, for Derrida, is the horizon in which and through which we live our lives. And what we are called to here is not the grasping hand of knowledge – but the openness of judgement.

I just spoke about judgement. Another way of talking about this is to say that we are here engaged in *responsible* ways of thinking. This invokes an argument I have made elsewhere regarding the 'receptive and 'responsible' nature of human thinking (2015; 2016). I attempted there to show how a Heideggerian perspective re-orientates us as *receptive* to the world, insofar as the revealing and concealing we enact as we live our lives as human beings is conditioned upon the world's first being opened and present to us. Yet I highlighted that this also makes us *responsible* beings insofar as our opening up of the world happens in ways that we can never fully manage and control – the world is opened by and through what we say and what we do. A Derridean account builds on this. For what we are moved towards with Derrida is a way of thinking that would incorporate a responsiveness to *what comes* (which, let us recall, Bakhurst himself keeps open), but also gestures towards what is (yet) *to come* – to borrow Paul Standish's phrasing (2016, p. 9). It is a form of receptivity, then, that has built into it a sense of address and of invocation. Elaboration of these points regrettably goes beyond the scope of the present paper. But part of what is at stake here is the recognition that, just as our response to a text or a poem is conditioned by a prior addresses or call to thinking – which we can never fully meet insofar as there is always something 'unclaimed' in the text – so too is human thinking itself a responsiveness that begins in an address or call, which we are never fully adequate to and which remains beyond us. Hence our thinking begins, inescapably, in *responsibility* – in a response that is at the same time an infinite openness to what is still to come.

'To Catch at and Let Go'

For the sub-title of this paper, I have borrowed a line from Robert Browning's poem, 'Two in the Campagna'. Browning's poem could be read as an exploration of the transience of time, of the passing nature of love and of human finitude. It reflects on such themes in the context of a lover's inability to be and remain fully present within an intense experience with his beloved. Later in the poem, after the line we have iterated, comes the imperative: 'Hold it fast!' – which is itself soon frustrated ('/then the good minute goes …'). One of the things Browning's poem brings us to question here is the apparent psychological need we have as human beings to keep a hold on things – to keep things fully 'there' and present – and whether this is reflective of a more general sense that, in doing so, we serve to make things more significant, more genuine, more true.

I cannot pursue this thought too much further here. Yet in bringing our discussion to a close, it is perhaps worth reflecting on whether part of what is so compelling about a conceptually driven account of 'the kinds of beings we are' such as that developed by Bakhurst is that it opens a rich picture of human thought, while at the same time appealing to our desire to have something firm to hold on to. Philosophers, after all, feel that with talk of the 'conceptual' they reach something stable and secure, something that is, even, clear and true.[x] In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that such talk should be dispensed with as some psychological ruse. And, as I have said, there is much that is rich and compelling in Bakhurst's account. Yet what I have attempted to explore in this paper is whether we might, nevertheless, need to go a way further in our understanding of 'the kinds of beings we are' – and whether the conceptual idiom, in the end, holds us back from doing so. The apparent clarity that comes from talking in terms of concepts might, after all, obscure the ways we 'catch at and let go'.

NOTES

[i] In the philosophical literature, notably recent examples are the collection of essays in Schear, 2013 and Taylor and Dreyfus, 2015. In philosophy of education, see Standish, 2016a and Derry 2016.

[ii] [redacted]

[iii] See for example Dan Zhavai (2013, p. 326), who has admitted concern that 'Dreyfus doesn't propose or offer an alternative conception of the mind and the mental'. Lee Braver makes a similar objection (2013). Paul Standish has also criticised Dreyfus on similar grounds (2016a).

[iv] [redacted].

[v] One source of evidence often cited here is Plato's disparaging discussion of the myth of the invention of writing in the *Phaedrus.* Christopher Norris (1987, chapter 3) gives a good account of this.

[vi] I am here employing a similar claim to one made by Derrida against John Austin, as is helpfully clarified by Simon Glendinning (2001).

[vii] John Keats, *Letter to Benjamin Bailey.*

[viii] Although McDowell himself does not seem to speak about language in these terms – and in *Mind and World* he refers with apparent approval to Michael Dummett's saying that language is an instrument of thought. There is, of course, another tradition in 'analytic' philosophy that is attentive to such productive potential – for example the work of John Austin on the performative

[ix] There is not the space to develop Derrida's metaphorics of the 'trace' and the 'ghostly' here, but I have sought to develop these elsewhere (2016a).

[x] [redacted]

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