



**MIND, REASON, AND
BEING-IN-THE-WORLD**
**THE McDOWELL-
DREYFUS DEBATE**

EDITED BY
JOSEPH K. SCHEAR

ROUTLEDGE



MIND, REASON, AND BEING-IN-THE-WORLD

John McDowell and Hubert L. Dreyfus are philosophers of world renown whose work has done much to shape the fields of analytic philosophy and phenomenology respectively. *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell–Dreyfus Debate* opens with their debate over one of the most important and controversial subjects in philosophy: is human experience permeated with conceptual rationality, or does experience mark the limits of reason? Is all intelligibility rational, or is there a form of intelligibility at work in our skillful bodily rapport with the world that falls outside our intellectual capacities? McDowell and Dreyfus provide a fascinating insight into some fundamental differences between analytic philosophy and phenomenology as well as areas where they may have something in common.

Fifteen specially commissioned chapters by distinguished international contributors enrich the debate inaugurated by McDowell and Dreyfus, taking it in a number of different and important directions. Fundamental philosophical problems discussed include: the embodied mind, subjectivity and self-consciousness, intentionality, rationality, practical skills, human agency, and the history of philosophy from Kant to Heidegger. With the addition of these outstanding contributions, *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World* should be considered essential reading for students and scholars of analytic philosophy and phenomenology.

Contributors: Lee Braver, Taylor Carman, Tim Crane, Hubert L. Dreyfus, Sebastian Gardner, John McDowell, Barbara Montero, Alva Noë, Robert B. Pippin, Joseph Rouse, Joseph K. Schear, Susanna Schellenberg, Charles Siewert, Charles Taylor, and Dan Zahavi.

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INTRODUCTION

Joseph K. Shear

No one in our day has done more than Hubert L. Dreyfus to make Anglophone philosophy less parochial. For some forty years, he has helped the rest of us understand what our European colleagues are up to, introduced us to them, and encouraged the study of their works.

Richard Rorty¹

No book written in the past decade or so has generated more interest amongst professional philosophers than John McDowell's *Mind and World*.

Nicholas H. Smith²

The background to the volume

Hubert L. Dreyfus took the occasion of his 2005 American Philosophical Association Presidential Address, "Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise," to attack John McDowell's position on mind and world. In McDowell's massively influential book, *Mind and World*, one of his primary targets, following Wilfred Sellars, is the "Myth of the Given."³ The mythical idea of the given, McDowell contends, is the idea of an object being given to a subject to know without drawing on the rational capacities required to know the object.⁴ In his Presidential Address, Dreyfus accuses McDowell of overreaching: in the urgency to avoid the Myth of the Given, McDowell falls prey to what Dreyfus dubs the "Myth of the Mental." The mythical idea of the mental, Dreyfus contends, is the idea that the "mind is everywhere the pure given is not," or alternatively, the claim that all intelligibility is pervaded by rational capacities.⁵ And so began a debate between two of our most important and influential philosophers.

At the 2006 meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Washington, DC, Dreyfus and McDowell, along with John Haugeland, participated in a panel organized to thrash out what is at stake in the debate. McDowell clarified and defended his position against Dreyfus's charge ("What Myth?"), which was followed by a series of exchanges

between them published collectively, in 2007, in the pages of *Inquiry*, under the editorship of Wayne Martin.⁶ James Conant organized a workshop devoted to the exchanges in 2009 at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, bringing together Dreyfus and McDowell, as well as a number of other philosophers (including several of the contributors to this volume), for three days of searching discussion. In the present volume, Dreyfus and McDowell have written essays especially for the volume, each summing up their respective positions. Thirteen previously unpublished essays, written by some of the many philosophers provoked by the debate, follow the opening two essays.

The central issue at stake between Dreyfus and McDowell is the extent to which conceptual rationality is involved in our skillful embodied rapport with the world. Examples of skills that figure in the exchange include opening doors, playing sports, and blitz chess, standing the appropriate distance from someone in conversation, chasing streetcars, and catching a frisbee, among others. McDowell urges that conceptual rationality is, as he puts it, “everywhere in our lives,” including in our skillful embodied comportment.⁷ Dreyfus, by contrast, seeks to identify and describe forms of “absorbed coping” that do not come within the scope of conceptual rationality. These skills, Dreyfus argues, open us to a world that solicits our bodily comportment, a world that is more basic than the objective reality to which we are open in McDowell’s broadly epistemic conception of experience. We are not, Dreyfus urges, “full-time rational animals.”⁸

Dreyfus’s criticisms of McDowell are an effort to extend and elaborate his long-standing attack on various forms of intellectualism and rationalism in the theory of human intelligence. But this latest target has little interest in *artificial* reason: McDowell is not committed to any of the philosophical assumptions about the mind that Dreyfus famously identified as underlying the dogged optimism found in what John Haugeland called GOFAI (good old fashioned artificial intelligence).⁹ A mark of the sophistication of this recent rationalist target, and surely the label in some sense fits, is that “rationalism,” and indeed “intellectualism,” are terms of criticism that McDowell himself is prone to deploy. For example, McDowell has long sought to protect Aristotle’s teaching about virtue and practical wisdom from various excessively rationalistic and intellectualized deformations he believes it has suffered in the hands of other commentators. His effort to make this teaching safe is offered in the name (following David Wiggins) of a “careful and sensitive moral phenomenology.”¹⁰

Along with Aristotle, the exegesis of figures such as Kant, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein has figured in the debate between Dreyfus and McDowell. Anyone familiar with the work of Dreyfus and McDowell will not find this surprising. Both philosophers are exemplars of how to integrate historical exegesis with ambitious systematic philosophy (which is not to say that they do this in the same way). This is

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no small part of what makes their respective work so distinctive and exciting, and what has made their debate provoke so much interest across diverse spheres of the philosophical community. My aim in compiling this collection of essays has been to try and do justice to the broad scope of systematic and historical reflection the debate invites.

I have particularly sought to include contributions from philosophers who, like Dreyfus and McDowell, ignore the dreary and increasingly obsolete division between "analytic" philosophy and "continental" philosophy. (One way of ignoring the division, in the broad sense I mean, is to uncover ways in which current attempts at integration may be distorting; see [chapter 5](#).) And while I could hardly have discouraged philosophers from keeping score, I did encourage the contributors to use the debate as a context to deepen and expand the discussion of the issues at stake. Topics in the philosophy of mind, metaphysics and epistemology, the philosophy of action, the theory of rationality, aesthetics, the theory of virtue, and philosophical methodology all come to life in the following chapters.

Among the many questions raised by the debate and explored in the contributions are the following: What is the place of reason in human life? Is all intelligibility rational intelligibility, or is there a form of intelligibility characteristic of our skilled bodily engagement with the world that falls outside the reach of reason? What is the relationship between bodily skills and intentional action? What are conceptual capacities? How do such capacities figure in bodily movement and perceptual experience? Does experience have nonconceptual content? Does embodied skilful comportment have nonconceptual content? How should we understand the distinctively human form of relation to the world while doing justice to our continuity with nonrational animals? What is the nature of the know-how at work in practical skills, and in what sense, if at all, is such know-how rational? Is reflection essential to, or rather an enemy of, expert performance? Does virtuous action require having a reason for one's action? What does the charge of "intellectualism" amount to, and who ultimately is more guilty of it, McDowell or Dreyfus? Does the first-person authority characteristic of conscious experience require rationality and language? What is the role of phenomenological reflection in addressing these questions? What is the relationship between phenomenological methods in philosophy and transcendental philosophy? Is the tradition of existential phenomenology (Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty) an extension, or rather a decisive critique, of Kant's project in the *Critique of Pure Reason*? What does Kant mean by "apperception," and by "synthesis"? What does Heidegger mean by "being-in-the-world," and by "thinking"? What does Sartre mean by the "prereflective cogito"? What does Merleau-Ponty mean by "motor intentionality"?

Anyone interested in these and related questions will discover much of interest in the rich set of chapters that follows. The volume is particularly

valuable for those interested in the increasing influence of the phenomenological tradition on contemporary philosophy, and correlatively, the increasing influence of contemporary debates on our reception of the phenomenological tradition.

Of course, no single volume devoted to an exchange as fertile as that between Dreyfus and McDowell can possibly do justice to all the relevant topics and themes worth investigating. Historical lacunae in this volume include an independent discussion of Aristotle on virtue and practical wisdom, on the one hand, and a focused interpretation of Sartre's theory of self-consciousness, on the other. Systematic lacunae include an in-depth discussion, raised by McDowell's debt to Anscombe, of practical self-knowledge in action, on the one hand, and a thorough investigation, raised by Dreyfus's contribution, of social norms and their role in our relation to the world, on the other. The volume, I hope, will help provoke readers to take up these and no doubt other avenues of approach to the McDowell–Dreyfus dispute in future work.

The structure and content of the book

The volume is divided into five parts. **Part I**, "A battle of myths," contains the new essays by Dreyfus and McDowell. Dreyfus (**chapter 1**) rebuts his charge against McDowell "The Myth of the Pervasiveness of the Mental." The original label "The Myth of the Mental" had the misleading implication that the mental as such is a myth, which Dreyfus of course does not endorse. Dreyfus sums up the basic contours of his case against McDowell's thesis that conceptual capacities must be always and everywhere operative in human experience. Presenting a number of putative counterexamples to McDowell's thesis, while drawing on select passages in the work of the existential phenomenologists Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, Dreyfus aims to identify and describe the "nonconceptual world of absorbed coping." Dreyfus puts on display forms of absorbed embodied activity in which the "mind/world distance" he deems characteristic of conceptual rationality is not in play. McDowell begins his account of the relation of mind and world, as Dreyfus puts it, "too late."

Dreyfus then moves to his argument for the nonconceptuality of social norms at work in our everyday relating to others. Styles of normative comportment, examples of which include distance standing in conversation and living out gender roles, are charged with meaning – e.g. the meaning of intimacy in one's culture, or the meaning of what it is to be masculine or feminine. However, Dreyfus notes that participants in these practices need not be, and generally are not, able to cite such meanings as reasons for their comportment. Indeed, agents are typically not even aware of these meanings, yet the meanings are nonetheless at work in their comportment. If this

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absorbed coping is not rational engagement, yet it is more than a kind of instinctual behavior, what is it? Dreyfus's aim in the paper is to call our attention to a distinctively human way of being-in-the-world that falls outside what Dreyfus sees as the limited space of options that controls McDowell's thinking.

In defense of his claim that rational mindedness pervades our lives, McDowell replies that Dreyfus's allegation itself rests on a myth, "The Myth of the Mind as Detached" (chapter 2). According to this myth, mindedness implies the presence of a detached self. But McDowell rejects this implication, and so does not accept the conception of rational mindedness to which Dreyfus objects. McDowell stresses, furthermore, that part of his point in claiming that rational mindedness is pervasive in our lives is to insist that mindedness does not always involve detachment.

McDowell agrees with Dreyfus that any adequate conception of our active life in the world must accommodate absorbed coping and acting in flow; he seeks to make room for these phenomena within his picture by focusing especially on Dreyfus's case of the chess master absorbed in lightning chess. McDowell urges that the chess master's absorption does not prevent him from knowing what he is up to, and that, moreover, if the chess master really is a master, he will be able to give rational explanations of his moves as intelligible responses to the forces on the board. So understood, the chess master's expert play is a case of "cultivated rationality" in operation. This is precisely the "actualization" of conceptual capacities in experience and action that McDowell is keen to highlight. As for normative social comportment such as appropriate distance standing in conversation, McDowell is prepared to grant that such comportment is not pervaded by rational mindedness. However, he insists that the exercises of such socialized dispositions, as modes of responsiveness to cultural norms, are not exercises of genuine agency in his sense. So distance standing, McDowell submits, does not threaten his basic thesis about the pervasively rational nature of intentional agency – the case is "no more relevant ... than is, say, the distinctively human character of the things a Xhosa speaker does with her tongue and palate in sounding those click consonants."¹¹

Part II, "From Kant to existential phenomenology," contains the more historical and exegetical contributions, though in each chapter the readings are informed by, and in the service of, systematic philosophical aims.

Charles Taylor (chapter 3), whose pioneering work in post-Kantian philosophy and the philosophy of mind is everywhere in the background of the exchanges between Dreyfus and McDowell, offers a characteristically wide-ranging historical narrative. Taylor traces the slow overcoming of what he calls the modern "mediational" picture of our relation to the world. After identifying the diverse and powerful sources that have made the mediational picture attractive, Taylor sketches an alternative

picture of our being in “contact” with the world, strands of which are present in the work of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty. Taylor reads the exchange between McDowell and Dreyfus as a testament to the progress contemporary philosophy has made in this “retrieval of realism.”

Robert B. Pippin (chapter 4) explores what he deems the key historical connection of the exchange, namely Kant’s claim that experience is apperceptive. Pippin is of course keen to defend the claim; the precise interpretation of it has been a rich source of contention between Pippin and McDowell in recent exchanges. In his chapter, Pippin takes Dreyfus’s denial of the claim as an invitation to spell out in a fresh way what precisely the Kantian thought comes to. After sketching an interpretation of Kant’s conception of the categorial unity of experience, Pippin proceeds to uncover the Aristotelian inheritance at work in Sellars’s Kantian account of the conceptual form of intuitional content. Pippin develops these resources to propose a distinctively sensory actualization of conceptual powers that, avoiding intellectualism about experience, nevertheless provides for a distinction between a nonrational animal’s immersion in its environment and our self-correcting reason-responsive openness to a world. Pippin concludes his essay with some suggestive Hegelian considerations about the “mediated immediacy” of reason in human life.

In his bold historical survey, “Transcendental philosophy and the possibility of the given,” Sebastian Gardner (chapter 5) argues that transcendental philosophy is devoted to the preempirical explanation of the very possibility of a subject’s being presented with an object (“the given”). This explanatory project extends beyond its original setting in Kant’s theory of synthesis, Fichte’s theory of object-positing, and Hegel’s idealist metaphysics of reason, Gardner contends, for it was adopted by the main practitioners of the phenomenological tradition, including Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Both McDowell and Dreyfus, on Gardner’s reading, ultimately back away from the true explanatory obligations of transcendental philosophy – McDowell by setting his sights narrowly on the justifiability of beliefs, and Dreyfus by settling for a merely descriptive approach to “the mind.” Gardner diagnoses the dispute between them as rooted in their respective ways of refusing, or at least scaling down, the aspirations of transcendental philosophy. Concluding his essay with some suggestive remarks about the possible tension between McDowell’s transcendentalism and his (Wittgensteinian) therapeutic approach to philosophy, Gardner also casts suspicion on making the unification of post-analytic philosophy and post-Kantian continental philosophy a regulative ideal.

Lee Braver (chapter 6) surveys the history of Dreyfus’s influential pursuit of the idea that “mindedness is the enemy of embodied coping,” before challenging its Heideggerian provenance. Braver claims that Heidegger

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himself considered mindless coping the enemy of a lucid awareness of being. Braver proceeds to draw on Heidegger's late work (as well as Wittgenstein's late work) to offer a phenomenology of thinking: Braver urges that the absorbed character Dreyfus stresses as characteristic of embodied skills is also characteristic of abstract thinking and deliberation.

Part III, "Intellectualism and understanding," contains contributions which mount one form or another of the charge of intellectualism. The central positive theme of these essays is the sense in which understanding, either intellectual or "motor," does or does not enter into experience. In each piece, the systematic argument is partly moved by readings of figures in the tradition of phenomenology.

Taylor Carman (chapter 7) charges McDowell with committing the "scholastic fallacy," namely the illicit projection of the structure and content of reflection into unreflective experience. This is a standing temptation for reflection, especially for the philosopher, whose business after all is to reflect, hence the difficulty of phenomenology. However, Carman urges that by careful attention to the skillful social intelligence at work in the art of conversation, we can resist succumbing to the scholastic fallacy. Carman exploits the example to distinguish the baby from the bathwater of Dreyfus's critique of McDowell. The baby lies in the distinction between the kind of content involved in the "engaged" attitude and, by contrast, the detachable and abstractable contents suitable to rational inference, deliberation, and decision.

Dreyfus charges McDowell, in effect, with an overintellectualizing of experience and activity: Alva Noë (chapter 8) claims that this charge rests on, as his title announces, an "overintellectualizing of the intellect." With this diagnosis, that Dreyfus mistakenly thinks the only legitimate exercise of the understanding is deliberative judgment or contemplation, Noë joins forces with McDowell's contribution. Noë proceeds to develop the idea of a nonjudgmental use of concepts in experience, understood as ways of achieving access to the world. (This allows Noë to reply to some recent criticism of his own views by his colleague John Campbell.) Noë proposes furthermore that we take the involvement of understanding and criticism in aesthetic experience as a paradigm for the sense in which understanding informs perceptual experience more generally. Doing so, Noë concludes, promises insight into the nature of phenomenology.

In his "Intellectualism, experience, and motor understanding," Charles Siewert (chapter 9) grants McDowell's claim that our nature as self-conscious reasoners pervasively shapes our perceptual experience. However, Siewert rejects McDowell's claim that every aspect of experience is (as McDowell puts it) "present in a form in which it is suitable to constitute the content of conceptual capacities." Siewert argues that there are nonfocal variations in appearance that structure visual experience of objects, which are sufficient for intentionality, but are not "conceptually ready." Siewert

proceeds to develop the argument by appropriating Merleau-Ponty's account of the motor understanding at work in experiencing objects. The essay culminates with a sympathetic and detailed interpretation (and revised translation) of the passage in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, mocked by McDowell, that loomed so large in the *Inquiry* exchanges between Dreyfus and McDowell.¹²

Part IV, "Experience, concepts, and nonconceptual content," contains contributions about the nature of conceptual capacities and the problem of the content of experience. Each chapter, prompted by the McDowell–Dreyfus exchange, offers a new intervention in the debate, inaugurated by Gareth Evans, about whether the content of perceptual experience is conceptual or nonconceptual.

C. I. Lewis's view of the "given" in his 1929 book *The Mind and World Order* was one of Wilfred Sellars's targets in his 1956 attack on the "Myth of the Given" – an attack that has of course been central to McDowell's project. In his essay "The Given," Tim Crane (chapter 10) seeks to revive a nonmythical conception of the given, moved by the question: What precisely is given or conveyed to the subject in experience? After surveying various options for specifying the content of experience in propositionalist terms (Russellian, Fregean, and the Lewis/Stalnaker view), Crane distinguishes the phenomenological conception of the content of experience from a semantic one. Drawing on Frege's conception of "ideas" and Husserl's account of "real content," Crane offers a new case for his long-standing commitment to the nonconceptual (phenomenological) content of experience.

Joseph Rouse (chapter 11) distinguishes a descriptive account of concepts from a normative account of concepts. He claims that Dreyfus's criticisms of McDowell's claim that conceptual understanding is pervasive in perception rest on attributing to McDowell a descriptive account. However, McDowell, as well as John Haugeland, adopts a normative approach, which Rouse claims is ultimately orthogonal to Dreyfus's concerns. Rouse proceeds to propose a "merger" between McDowell and Dreyfus. Building on Dreyfus's phenomenology of absorbed coping, Rouse sketches a theory of discursive practice according to which conceptual understanding itself is a form of practical–perceptual coping with the environment.

Susanna Schellenberg (chapter 12) sheds light on the debate between Dreyfus and McDowell about the role and nature of concepts in perceptual experience, by considering the following trilemma:

- (C1) Nonrational animals and humans can be in mental states with the same kind of content when they are perceptually related to the very same environment.
- (C2) Nonrational animals do not possess concepts.
- (C3) Content is constituted by modes of presentations and is, thus, conceptually structured.

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She discusses reasons for accepting and rejecting each of the three claims. By developing a substantive notion of modes of presentation as constituting nonconceptual content, she argues that the trilemma is best resolved by giving up (C3). In doing so, she discusses the nature of mental content and its relation to bodily skills and conceptual capacities as well as the notions of conceptual and nonconceptual content.

Part V, “Bodily skills, rationality, and self-consciousness,” contains essays devoted to exploring the relationship between bodily skills and our capacity for self-conscious rationality and reflection, as well as the question of whether self-consciousness requires rationality.

In “Are we essentially rational animals?,” my contribution to the volume (chapter 13), I claim, first, that the McDowell–Dreyfus exchange, to the extent that it is a real dispute, is about this question. I then distinguish two of Dreyfus’s arguments against McDowell – the argument from critical distance, on the one hand, and the phenomenological argument from the “merging” structure of embodied skillful comportment, on the other. The first argument, I suggest, misfires. The second, by contrast, promises to meet its target; the question of its persuasiveness turns on whether Dreyfus’s phenomenology of “merging” is faithful. I close by considering a separate argument for our essentially rational way of being, sympathetic to McDowell, that calls attention to our power to ask the question of what, or who, we are. This argument, I urge, supports only a weak reading of our essentially rational character with which Dreyfus, and certainly Heidegger, need not disagree. This raises an open and pressing an exegetical question about Heidegger and the problem of reason, with which I conclude.

In her “A dancer reflects,” Barbara Montero (chapter 14), a professional ballet dancer turned philosopher, attacks what she calls the principle of automaticity in the theory of expertise. This principle has long been endorsed by Dreyfus, among other philosophers and psychologists. The principle states, roughly, that expert action does not involve thought or cognition (e.g. self-reflection, planning, predicting, deliberating). In addition to some neurological data that might seem to support the principle, Montero considers the widely held “maxim of cognitive interference,” that thinking about what you are doing while doing it interferes with performing. Montero argues that the psychological evidence available does not decisively support the principle. She proceeds to offer some first-personal observations on how thinking and deliberate consideration are essential to the expert performance of, say, the White Swan *pas de deux*.

Dan Zahavi (chapter 15) seeks to reject an assumption about mindedness that he deems McDowell and Dreyfus both share, namely that the first-personal character of conscious experience involves conceptuality, rationality, and language. Dreyfus, according to Zahavi, assumes this to reject the idea that self-consciousness is operative at the level of absorbed coping. But if, drawing on Sartre and Heidegger, we can recognize a more basic form of

self-acquaintance prior to and independent of rational self-consciousness, we can see that absorbed coping, so far as it is conscious, indeed involves a sense of self. Recognizing this primitive reflexivity, Zahavi further contends, puts a serious burden of proof on McDowell, whose conception of mature adult subjectivity renders the transition from nonlinguistic infant self-awareness to conceptual self-awareness a “miracle.”

Notes

- 1 Foreword to Wrathall and Malpas (eds), *Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity*.
- 2 Introduction to Smith (ed.), *Reading McDowell*.
- 3 The book is composed of lectures first delivered as the John Locke lectures in Oxford in Trinity Term, 1991.
- 4 See Lectures I–III of McDowell, *Mind and World*. For a more recent statement by McDowell, on which my formulation draws, see his “Avoiding the Myth of the Given,” in Lindgaard (ed.), *John McDowell: Experience, Norm, and Nature*.
- 5 Dreyfus, “Overcoming the Myth of the Mental,” p. 52.
- 6 McDowell, “What Myth?”; Dreyfus, “Return of the Myth of the Mental”; McDowell, “Response to Dreyfus”; Dreyfus, “Response to McDowell.” While the statements of their respective positions in this volume are self-contained and reliable summaries, readers interested in every twist and turn are encouraged to consult the *Inquiry* exchanges.
- 7 McDowell, “What Myth?,” p. 343.
- 8 Dreyfus, “Return of the Myth of the Mental,” p. 354.
- 9 See [part II](#) of Dreyfus’s well-known and now victorious *What Computers Can’t Do*.
- 10 See, for example, McDowell’s classic essay, “Virtue and Reason,” reprinted in his *Mind, Value, and Reality*, as well as his more recent paper, “Deliberation and Moral Development in Aristotle’s Ethics,” reprinted as [chapter 3](#) in his collection, *The Engaged Intellect*.
- 11 McDowell, “The myth of the mind as detached,” this volume, p. 55.
- 12 The passage in the standard translation, as it figured in the exchanges, reads: “In perception we do not think the object and we do not think ourselves thinking it, we are given over to the object and merge into this body which is better informed than we are about the world, and about the motives we have and the means at our disposal.” Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 277.

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