Concept Pluralism, Direct Perception, and the Fragility of Presence

Alva Noë

This paper has three main aims. First, I criticize intellectualism in the philosophy of mind and I outline an alternative to intellectualism that I call Concept Pluralism. Second, I seek to unify the sensorimotor or enactive approach to perception and perceptual consciousness developed in O'Regan & Noë (2001) and Noë (2004, 2012), with an account of understanding concepts. The proposal here—that concepts and sensorimotor skills are species of a common genus, that they are kinds of *skills of access*—is meant to offer an extension of the earlier account of perception. Finally, I describe a phenomenon—fragility—that has been poorly understood, but whose correct analysis is critical for progress in the theory of mind (both perception and cognition).

Keywords
Actionism | Concept pluralism | Concepts | Consciousness | Enactive account | Evans | Fragility | Frege | Intellectualism | Kant | Perception | Plato | Presence | Sensorimotor account | The intellectualist insight | The intellectualist thesis | Understanding | Wittgenstein

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1 Introduction

The present study takes its starting point from the enactive or sensorimotor, or, as I now prefer to call it, the actionist approach to perception and perceptual consciousness (O'Regan & Noë 2001; Noë 2004, 2012). Actionism is the thesis that perception is the activity of exploring the environment making use of knowledge of sensorimotor contingencies. Sensorimotor contingencies are understood to be patterns of dependence of sensory change on movement. The proposal, then, is that we make use of this knowledge of the way our own movement gives rise to sensory change to explore the world. This knowledge-based or skilful activity *is* perceiving.

We characterized the relevant kind of knowledge as *knowledge* precisely in order to mark the continuity between perception and "higher", more intellectual kinds of cognition such as thought and planning (O'Regan & Noë 2001). At the same time, we were quick to characterize the relevant forms of knowledge as practical, non-propositional, as implicit, or as "skill", precisely in order to avoid over-intellectualizing perception.

In *Action in Perception* (Noë 2004, Ch. 6), I defended the view that perception requires the mastery and exercise of concepts. In doing so, I took myself to be lowering the bar on what it is to have a concept, rather than raising the bar on

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what it is to be a perceiver. It was always my view that the resulting account was one in which understanding (mastery and use of concepts, including sensorimotor skills) and perception (exploration of the environment drawing on a variety of skills, including concepts, as conventionally understood, and also sensorimotor skills) worked together in human and animal mental life. As I put it later, "understanding" and "perception" arrive at the party together (Noë 2012).

Although actionism places great emphasis in the importance of movement, action, and the body for the theory of perception, on the claim that perceiving is an activity, and on the proposition that perception is not a representation-building activity, it was never the intention of the view to deny the critical role of understanding and knowledge. The point, rather, was to offer a unified account of perception, consciousness, thought, and action. But the details were not entirely worked out. Knowledge, skill, ability, and understanding were not carefully defined, and the precise relation between the account of perception and that of conceptual understanding was not spelled out in detail. I try to rectify that here.

My basic strategy in this paper is as follows. In part I, I offer an extended discussion of what I call intellectualism. I define the view, criticize it, and show how even critics of the view tend to share many of its presuppositions. In part II, I try to offer an alternative to intellectualism, namely concept pluralism, which builds upon the actionist conception of concepts as "skills of access". Concepts, I propose, should be thought of as techniques for enabling access to what there is. In this way—the details will become clear later on—I offer a way of thinking about concepts that is unified with the basic elements of the earlier theory of perception.

One caveat: I don't take up the issue of animal experience and cognition in this paper, even though it is directly relevant to the topic.

I

2 Modes of understanding

Kant (1791) said that concepts are predicates of possible judgement. That's what concepts are. They are creatures of judgement. He also believed that concepts play a basic role in cognition. They organize the data of sense. Without concepts, sensory experience would be empty sensation; without sensory influx, there'd be nothing for concepts to organize. For Kant, judgement gives the basic form of experience (*Erfahrung).*

Frege (1891) said that concepts are functions from objects to truth-values. In this he appeared to break with Kant. Concepts have nothing to do with judgement or with our cognitive organization. They are before all that. This is in tune with Frege's well-known anti-psychologism, according to which grasping, understanding, judging, and communicating are of no relevance to logic or ontology.[1] But Frege doesn't actually sever the link between concepts and judgement; he only frames it differently. Concepts figure in what is judged; they belong to *judgeable content.* So Frege preserves Kant's link to judgement, but in a de-psychologized version.[2]

Frege's anti-psychologism gets him into trouble.[3] The fact that concepts are not themselves psychological, in the sense of being ideas or associations or feelings, doesn't mean that they are not tied to understanding or judgement, for nothing forces us to think of understanding and judgement as psychological in that sense. At the same time, the claim that concepts are "third-realm" entities gives little substance to the idea that they are, in the relevant sense, objective. Finally, if concepts are some sort of occult abstracta, then it isn't at all clear how we can grasp them. And surely, whatever concepts are, it is the case that we can grasp them.

I'll return to this set of issues later. But for now let us agree that for both Kant and Frege, concepts are tied to judgement, where this means something like: they are tied to categorizing, to explicit reasoning, to subsuming objects under concepts. Each of these thinkers offers an account of concepts, or of the under-

1 See, for example, Frege's "Thoughts", (1918–1919).

2 Not that I mean to suggest that it is right to think of Kant as actually offering a psychological account. But it might look this way from Frege's perspective.

3 As both Dummett (1973) and Baker & Hacker (1984) have noticed.

standing of concepts, in what I'll call the mode of judgement. According to Kant and Frege, grasp or understanding of concepts finds its natural, true expression in judgement.

This paper takes its start from the observation that there would appear to be other modes of conceptual activity, other ways for understanding (for concepts) to find expression in our lives. At least on the face it, judgement would not seem to be the only mode of conceptual understanding.

Take, for example, *perceptual understanding*, or what we might call *understanding concepts in the perceptual mode*. Consider reading. It is difficult to tell, looking at the entrance to the Taj Mahal, which bits of squiggle are mere ornament, and which are writing in Classical Arabic. You can have this experience, it is available to you, only if you are not fluent in Classical Arabic, or in this style of Arabic script. This marks the spot of the basic phenomenon: there would seem to be a mode of understanding that is perceptual in nature. It is impossible, as a psychological matter, to see meaningful text as a mere squiggle. For the one who knows, for the one who can, meaningful words just show up.

Compare this with the case of a scholar studying Renaissance paintings in which writing is shown embroidered into the robes of magi and other fabulous figures. Are these scripts in a familiar language, or could they be marks from a forgotten one? Or are they *pseudo*-scripts? How do you decide? A keen problem and one that affords opportunity, for it demands reasoning, explicit categorization, and judgement.[4]

But nothing like that seems to be going on when you are reading. And the point is general: it operates at the level of our everyday seeing. It is difficult, maybe even impossible—psychologically speaking—to see familiar kinds of things around us as mere things. We always see them as this or that.

I don't mean that when we see, we *represent* the things we really see around us as this or that, by bringing them under the relevant concepts, by categorizing them, as it were, in judgement. The point rather is that the things we see, the things around us, are familiar, known, comprehended, understood, and recognized, from the very outset. Concepts are geared in before we are even in a position to ask what something is or to make a judgement about it.[5]

So we have here a distinct way in which concepts, or the understanding, can be put to use outside the setting of judgement. Specifically, as I've said, this is an example of the deployment of concepts in the perceptual mode or, more simply, perceptual understanding.

Note, in saying perception is a non-judgemental mode of understanding, I don't mean to deny that there might be an interdependence between the judgemental and the perceptual modes. Maybe only one who can judge can perceive and precisely because perception enables judgement. And maybe it is only of one who can have perceptual experience that we could ever say that he or she is in a position to judge about anything.[6] My point is that, on the face of it, judging is one thing, and perceiving another, and yet they are both ways of exercising the understanding.

There are other modes, as well.

Concepts also get deployed in what I call the *active mode*; understanding, that is, can find expression, immediately, in what we do. There is such a thing as *practical* understanding. And what makes the relevant understanding practical is not that it is an exercise in judgement on, as it happens, practical matters. What makes it practical, in my view, is that it is the gearing in or putting to work of one's understanding in the absence of any call for, or even space for, reflection or judgement.

The dog walker's knowledge of dogs, for example, is put to work in the way he or she adopts a gait that suits the dog and encourages or permits it to accomplish its sniffy, doggy business; and so also in the way the owner spontaneously shortens the leash as another dog approaches; it is exhibited, even, we might say, in

4 For a discussion of this fascinating topic, see A. Nagel (2011).

5 As Heidegger (1927) would have put it, the things we encounter are *always already* familiar.

6 I return to this issue of the unity of concepts in section 6 below.

the cool she keeps when the two dogs begin barking and straining at their leashes. Without a word, in the absence of deliberation, or explicit thought, the owner knowingly engages the nature of dogs.[7]

And there may be still other kinds of understanding, other *styles* of conceptuality. For example, there is also perhaps what we could call the emotional mode, or maybe it would be better to say the personal, or even *inter*personal mode. Tears, feeling, injury, but also posture, standing distance to others, navigating in a social environment, can all show a highly refined attunement to situation, relationship, status, goals, tasks, and so on. It takes understanding to do all this, even though we rarely try to make this understanding explicit and even though, very probably, we cannot do this, even in ideal circumstances. Let us say that in this kind of responsive engagement with our social worlds we display understanding.[8]

To summarize: there is a case to be made for the existence of at least three, maybe four, distinct modes of understanding. There is the judgemental mode, the perceptual mode, and the active mode, and perhaps also the personal mode.

3 Intellectualism vs. the intellectualist insight

I have proposed that there are at least three or four distinct modes of understanding. I now turn to the familiar thought that among these varieties of expression of conceptual understanding, only one—the judgemental mode—is genuine. The other modes, according to this idea—that is, the perceptual, the active, the personal—are expressive of understanding only derivatively, thanks to the fact that they are guided or controlled, from outside as it were, by true understanding in the judgemental mode.

I will call this view intellectualism. Intellectualism, as I am defining it, is the view that one modality of conceptual expression is basic, namely, the judgemental, and that the others are domains where understanding finds expression only derivatively.[9]

Plato and Descartes seemed to have believed something like this. For them, a mere sensation rises to the level of perception, and a mere movement to the level of action, only if it is subject to guidance by reason. The soul is divided against itself and it achieves integration only when it is controlled in the right way from above.

Intellectualism is probably the establishment view in cognitive science. When you see the Pole Star, for example, as Fodor & Pylyshyn (1981) insist, you represent whatever it is that you really see—a pattern of irradiation of the retina, perhaps—*as* the Pole Star. To suppose otherwise is to suppose that vision could be, as Gibson (1986) had claimed, a *direct pick up* of what there is around us. But Pole Starhood, like the third dimension, is not something that gets projected onto the retina. The whatness of things, their nature, no less than the third-dimension itself, are not, strictly speaking, visible. We need judgement, the application of concepts (in this case perhaps automatic and implicit) in the building-up of mental representations, to get something like the world into our experience.[10]

Jason Stanley, in a series of writings (Stanley & Williamson 2001; Stanley 2011; Stanley & Krakauer 2013), defends what I am calling intellectualism. You perform a skilful ac-

7 This example is from Stephen Mulhall (1986).

8 With this last example we move beyond description to the suggestion of an argument. The thought is that the relevant forms of understanding couldn't be underwritten by judgement, since we are not able, as a general rule, to frame the needed judgements. Indeed, something like this line of thought is already suggested in the way I've sketched the perceptual and active modes above. Recall the celebrated case of Oliver Sacks (1970): a man can't recognize the item before him as a glove; his powers of judgement are fine—he describes what he sees as a self-enclosed piece of fabric with five outpouchings—and he knows what a glove is. The case is illustrative because it brings out that it is less the fact that he can't recognize the glove, and more the very fact that he needs to think about it all, that brings home the thought that in our normal life there is no room for that sort of deliberation.

9 Intellectualism can be defined differently. For a variety of approaches to problems in this vicinity, see Bengson & Moffett (2011).

10 This was David Marr's (1982) view. The content of visual experience is given in a 2.5D sketch, that is, in a depiction of what is given in the projection of the world onto the retina. It is only in so far as vision yields *knowledge* that it goes beyond what is given in this intermediate-level representation and gives rise to a fully conceptual 3D model. But for Marr, and for his recent advocates (Prinz 2013), although we live in the world of the 3D sketch, our experience is confined to the intermediate-level representation. And crucially, for these thinkers, you don't need concepts or understanding at the intermediate level. You just need optics.

tion, according to Stanley (2011), only when your action flows from your knowledge of true propositions. He elaborates:

> [t]here are all sorts of automatic mechanisms that operate in a genuine sense subpersonally. The human (and animal) capacity for skilled action is based upon these mechanisms. What makes an action an exercise of skill, rather than mere reflex, is the fact that it is guided by the intellectual apprehension of truths. (Stanley 2011, p. 174)

Is intellectualism right? Should we be intellectualists?

It is important that we notice, right away, that intellectualism is right about something. It does justice to the fact that there is understanding, and there is conceptuality, at work wherever we think and perceive and act and talk, as we have been considering. Conceptuality, understanding, and knowledge pervade not only the mental, but our lives and our being. Certainly, it is in evidence wherever we can speak of agency. Stanley insists (in the quotation above) that we can only speak of *skilful* action where there is understanding at work. He perhaps ought to have said that we can only speak of action at all, as opposed to mere reflex, or mere movement, where there is also understanding.

The question I would like us to consider is this: do we need intellectualism to secure this undoubted intellectualist insight, as I will dub the recognition of the pervasiveness of understanding in our perceptual, active, as well as emotional lives? It's crucial that we notice the distance between the insight and the thesis. It's one thing to say that there is understanding at work in perception and action, and another to think that what makes this true is that perception and action are grounded on acts of judgement. Do we need to think that what guarantees and secures the involvement of understanding is the fact that our seeings, doings, and feelings are guided by judgements?

There are, right off the bat, two obvious grounds for suspicion regarding the intellectualist thesis. For one thing, intellectualism at least threatens to obscure the differences to which I have been directing our attention among what at least appear to be authentically distinct ways of exercising one's knowledge and understanding. And so, it seems, it gets things wrong. Seeing and acting and dynamically reacting, most of the time at least, don't look or feel anything like bringing objects under concepts in judgement.

For another, intellectualism smacks of the arbitrary. Couldn't we maintain that perception is the basic form of understanding and that judgement, even in cases of pure reasoning and mathematics, rests on a kind of perceptual insight? Or that it is understanding in the active mode that is truly basic? Judgement itself depends on the mastery and exercise of conceptual capacities which are in the first instance practical. You need to know how to use concepts, after all, in order to use them in judgement.

In any case, let us ask again: are there reasons to endorse intellectualism? Why think that judgement is the primary and singular authentic modality of real understanding? Why be an intellectualist?

4 Troubles with intellectualism

Stanley's writings (Stanley & Williamson 2001; Stanley 2011; Stanley & Krakauer 2013) on the topic are suggestive. However, he seems to mistake evidence in favour of the insight (that understanding is present in perception and action, as well as in the setting of explicit deliberative thought) with support for intellectualism itself (for the view that judgement governs action and perception). And, on top of that, he may commit the fallacy of conceiving the whole genus on the model of one of its species; like thinking that every dog is a cat because, well, they are mammals, or that seeing is a way of touching because, after all, they are both forms of perception. In this case it is the fallacy of thinking that *knowing how* must be a form of *knowing that* because, after all, it is form of knowledge.

Let's turn to this last point first, briefly. Stanley (2011) notices that we use "to know" both for propositional knowledge and also for

practical knowledge (know-how). Contrary to what he suggests, however, there are cognate languages where this is not the case. For example, we don't express knowing how in German using the same verb that we use to express propositional knowledge (Stanley 2011, pp. 36-37). We use *können*, which means *can*; we don't use *wissen* (as in *wissen wie*).

But in any case, the more important point is, *so what?* How dispositive are facts like this supposed to be? It is common ground, I would say, that know-how is a form of knowledge, an achievement of understanding. The question is whether it is a form of knowledge of the same type as propositional knowledge, the sort of knowledge that gets expressed in judgement. Crucially, all the evidence in the world that it is a form of knowledge doesn't add up to evidence that it is propositional knowledge.

Now, as a matter of fact, we know that knowing how to do something is *not* merely knowing that a proposition is true, for any proposition you might care to think up. For knowing how to do something implies that you have the ability to do it (and vice versa), whereas the corresponding propositional knowledge has no such practical entailments.

Stanley would deny this (Stanley & Williamson 2001; Stanley 2011). You can know how to perform a stunt but be unable to perform it (because you've been injured, say); so, he claims, possession of know-how cannot be equivalent to possession of an actual ability. But this is unpersuasive. Of course it is true that you can know how to do something even though you are unable to do it. But this is because your being unable to do it is not, in the relevant sense, evidence that you can't do it! Consider: you can't swim if there's no water, even though you can swim. You can swim but you can't swim. Far from showing that know-how and ability part ways, this sort of consideration reminds us that they move along the same rails.

So knowing how to do something isn't possession of propositional knowledge: it doesn't consist in being in a position to make certain judgements. This is a point that Stanley and Williamson accept, if only implicitly, for they provide a different analysis of the cases precisely to account for the critical link to action in the case of know-how. Knowing how to do something, on their view, consists in grasping a true proposition, yes, but it consists in grasping it in a distinctively and irreducibly practical way (making use of practical modes of presentation).[11]

Again, it is worth noticing that to deny, as I do, that knowing how to do something consists in knowing the truth of a proposition, is not to deny that, as a matter of fact, knowing how to do something may put you in a position to make certain judgements, or may require you to appreciate the truth of certain propositions.

This brings us to the first point above: the confusion of evidence for the insight with evidence for the thesis. I am assuming that know-how, like propositional knowledge, is a form of knowledge. This common ground is already secured by the insight: our understanding, our knowledge of concepts, is put to use in both cases. So we can readily agree with Snowdon (2004), cited approvingly by Stanley (Stanley & Williamson 2001), that knowing how and knowing that go together—that where you have one, you have the other. In general, as Snowdon observes, if you know how to do something—say, how to get home from here—then you'll know that all sorts of things are true, such as, for example, *that* you need to turn left here, that you aren't already home, etc. And vice versa. Knowing how and knowing that, in this sense, commingle and cooperate. These considerations are adduced by Stanley, and by Snowdon, I think, to suggest that Ryle was mistaken in believing that the propositional and the practical are disjoint and disconnected (1949); in fact they operate together and in support of each other. This is an important point and one I endorse. And this is exactly what one should expect given the intellectualist insight. After all, understanding operates in both spheres: the practical and the judgemental or propositional. Crucially, however, the fact that the practical and the propos-

11 Stanley (2011) offers a different account from that developed in Stanley & Williamson (2001). The former is framed in terms of modal parameters governing the interpretation of the relevant sentences. Although he insists that know-how does not entail ability, he admits that attributions of know-how exhibit more or less the same sort of modality as ascriptions of dispositions and abilities.

itional mutually entail each other in this sort of way lends no support to the intellectualist idea that one of these, the propositional, is foundational in respect of the other; indeed, it weighs against that very idea. Why press on and insist on this thesis when, it would seem, the insight on its own is enough to capture the phenomenon at hand?

Stanley's motivations seem fairly clear. He wants to break with the idea that propositional knowledge is detached and, as he puts it, behaviourally inert. He wants to insist that it's wrongheaded to think that athletes and clowns and craftspeople are skilful zombies, whereas philosophers and mathematicians and physicists are *intellectual* workers whose actions exhibit authentic brain-power. It may be, even, that he thinks this is a point of political significance.

Intellectualism isn't necessary to secure any of this, however. The insight has already done that.

In fact, intellectualism, as Stanley develops it, threatens to distort the nature of the cognitive achievements that are put to work in our practical, perceptual, and personal engagements. This comes out in the discussion of skill. Stanley & Krakauer (2013) defend Aristotle's claim (from Metaphysics 1046b) that we can only speak of *skilful action*, as opposed to mere habit, or brute capacities, where we can speak of *rational control* of action, and also where we can speak of teaching, learning, practicing, getting better, or achieving expertise. They defend Aristotle's claim that it is a mark of skilfulness, that you can voluntarily choose to perform what you can do skilfully *badly*.

This last point seems unlikely. I can't choose not to understand what you say, or to see writing as mere squiggles, or words as composed of bits I need painstakingly to sound or spell out. A guitarist cannot choose to experience the instrument in his hands as strange or unfamiliar. At best, maybe, I can pretend I am unable to do these things.

Is this because talking and reading and playing guitar are not really skilful at all, that they are mere habits outside the range of rational control? Hardly! They're expressions of skilful competence, rational understanding and knowledge if anything is. The mistake is to think that a performance is only rational if control is exerted in the mode of judgement, as if from outside. The understanding that is put to work in our talk and play, as in our thought, is native to these various styles of engagements themselves.

Stanley and Krakauer make a lot of the demand that skill depends on knowledge of facts. It's worth noticing, yet again, that insisting, as I do, that skilfullness does not consist in the *exercise of concepts in the judgemental mode* does not entail that there can be skilfulness in the absence of the ability to exercise them in that mode. It may be, as a matter of fact—this is related to the Snowdon point above—that only someone who is sensitive to all sorts of facts, for example, about how something is done, will in fact know how to do it. This doesn't show that knowing how is a kind of knowledge of the facts. It shows rather that our distinct conceptual capacities may be interdependent.

Stanley and Krakauer try to draw a line between true skills, which are, in their sense, governed by rationality, and others—for example perceptual and linguistic skills—that are too basic, or too simple to qualify as skills in the fuller rational sense.[12]

One problem with this suggestion is that it is not so easy to draw a sharp line between skills and supposedly brute abilities. Take colour vision, for example, which is innate in humans. Despite this, it turns out that children find it very difficult to recognize and discriminate colours long after they've mastered the names of familiar objects, people, games, etc. As Akins (unpublished manuscript) has argued, this is probably because colours are not simple, as our phenomenology, or rather, our conventional wisdom about our phenomenology, leads us erroneously to believe. *Getting* blue or yellow or red is to develop a sensitivity to suites of constancies and variations—to ecological variation in what I have called *colour-critical condi-*

12 Stanley & Krakauer (2013, p. 5) write: "[b]ut at some point, all such knowledge will rest on knowledge of basic actions, such as grasping an object or lifting one's arm. These activities are not skills; they are not acquired by or improved upon by raining in adult life. Their manifestation is nevertheless under our voluntary control."

tions—that takes time and learning, and allows for criticism and reflection. Is colour vision basic? Or is it skilful? It may be both.

This is not a special case. Because seeing is saturated with understanding, it is very hard to find features of our ability that are not modulated by knowledge and context. Granted, the ability to discriminate line-gratings of different densities is fixed, at its limit, by the resolving powers of the eyes; yet our discriminations are likely to be sensitive to task and motivation, to attention and distraction—that is, very broadly, to our engagement with the meaningful world. So where does skill stop and brute ability begin? I am skeptical that learnability, teachability, or rational control provide an interesting or valuable demarcation. The most basic reason for this is that perceiving is never merely registration. It is a matter of knowledgable access (Noë 2004, 2012).

There is a second important issue as well. Consider language. Linguistic misunderstanding doesn't stop language in its tracks, ejecting you and sending you back to the grammar, written, as it were in advance, by those responsible for setting up the language. Rather, coping with misunderstanding—dealing with not getting how someone is using words, or how we should use them, or with not knowing how to use them—is one of language's familiar settings. We adjudicate and teach and learn and improve and criticize and define and formalize and evaluate *within* language, not from outside it. Language, contrary to the claims of Chomskyan linguistics, is not a rule-governed activity. It is a rule-using activity. And we make up the rules as we need them and for our own purposes. This may be controversial. But here's why I insist on it: according to the logician's or the linguist's picture of language, first you assign values to primitives, then you set up rules governing the construction of well-formed formulas. If you think of language this way, then it looks like you need judgement—the application of rules to cases—to secure the meaningfulness of what would otherwise be mere marks and noises. But we don't need judgement—we don't need understanding in the judgemental mode—to secure meaning. We don't need guidance from the outside.

The opposition between habit and skill is a false one; and it is a mistake to think that what marks the opposition is that habit is below or before understanding whereas skill is the deliberate exercise of understanding.

5 Troubles with anti-intellectualism

Some critics of intellectualism argue that perception cannot be conceptual, because if perception were conceptual, then perception would be a form of judgement. But the idea that perception is judgement over-intellectualizes perception.[13]

This is how I understand Gareth Evan's (1982) argument in connection with the Müller-Lyer illusion. You can experience the two lines in the Müller-Lyer illusion as different in length, even when you know, and so have not the even the weakest inclination to deny, that the lines are the same in length. The visual experience is one thing, and judgement another; hence experience is not conceptual.

Now, this is an example of an apparent disagreement between what you know to be the case (judgement) and how things look (experience). Things look precisely the way you know they are not. Experience and the judgement are in conflict. This shows, I would have thought, that experience, and the corresponding content, share the same kind of content. The fact that they are in apparent conflict shows that they are not somehow incommensurable. So if the one is conceptual, then so is the other.

But more important, for our discussion here, is that Evans seems to assume that concepts can only be in play if they are applied in judgement. Since experience is not judgement, there is no way for concepts to gear in. But that's to accept the basic claim of the intellectualist—judgement is the only way for concepts to get into the act—not to challenge it.

So Evans' argument against the idea that perceptual experience is conceptual—what we can think of as Evans's anti-intellectualism—actually takes what I am calling intellectualism

13 See Noë (2004, Ch. 6) for detailed engagement with the issue of the conceptuality of perception and the relation between my own position and that of John McDowell.

for granted. It takes for granted that there is only one genuine and legitimate mode of exercise of conceptual understanding, namely the judgemental.

Hubert Dreyfus (e.g., 2013) is responsible for a widely-influential criticism of intellectualism that is *crypto-intellectualist* in just this way.

Reasons, principles, and explicit knowledge guide perception and activity, according to Dreyfus, but only in the case of the novice. The expert, in contrast, is one who is engaged, in the flow. The expert, having mastered the rules and the concepts, has no further use for them. The expert is able to respond to the solicitations of situation and environment with no need for conscious thought or deliberate judgement.

A favourite example is that of the lightening chess player. There is literally no time, claims Dreyfus, for the chess player to analyse the situation and decide how to move. Moves are made in a flash. To suppose that the move is guided by reasons or judgement is to fall prey to a *myth of the mental*, according to which a mind-faculty, a faculty of judgement, say, accompanies our doings and is responsible for them being expressive of competence, intelligence, and understanding. For Dreyfus this idea is a dead giveaway of a distinct type of intellectualist psychologism. Yes, Dreyfus grants, if you ask the expert afterwards, why he or she made this move and not that one, he can give you a reason. But we have no more ground to suppose the reason was in operation before the player switched into the intellectual mode in response to the question than we do to suppose that the refrigerator light is always on because it is on whenever you open the fridge to look.

According to Dreyfus, understanding or reason operate only if there are explicit acts of rule-following, or judgement, that accompany, or even precede, every act. But why believe that? The baseball player doesn't need to be thinking about the rules for it to be the case that what he does is subject to them and is carried out, so to speak, in their light. The rules are there—in the form of umpires and rule books, and also dictionaries and courts of law, and earnest disagreement among participants—and we have access to them as need arises. The fact that we can use them, and that we care about their correct use, is all that is needed for it to be the case that we act under their influence. The influence is not causal. It is normative.

Dreyfus goes further and insists that whether or not it is always legitimate to demand that *the phronesis*, as he calls the expert, invoking Aristotle, justifies his or her actions, it will not in general be possible for him or her to do so. You can't make explicit the myriad rules governing how we stand or react or explore or decide because, as a matter of fact, there are no such general rules. There is nothing to be made explicit. At best the chess master is likely to point to the situation on the board and exclaim, *look! This situation requires this move!*

But why is not this exactly the kind of reply that is required? Recall Wittgenstein's (1953, §88) example of "Stand over there!" This can be a perfectly precise command, as exact as rationality can require, even when it is not the case that one can specify, to the millimetre, say, where it is one is supposed to stand. For certain purposes, in certain contexts, one may need more precision. But in other contexts the demand for precision on the order of millimetres would be unreasonable. And so my thought here is that it is to set too high a standard on what it would be to have a reason for acting to demand that one can frame it independently of the situation one is in. It is precisely an over-intellectualized conception of what it would be to have a reason, or to make use of a rule, to suppose that rules and reasons need to be context-free and situation-independent, known in advance and applied, as it were, from outside one's engaged play[14]—just as it would be to over-intellectualize the intellect in general to suppose that concepts only gear in in the setting of judgement.

Here's the point: the use of rules themselves—which for Dreyfus is the hallmark of the detached attitude of the intellect—is itself an activity that admits of mastery and expertise and so also flow. And so we cannot insist that rule-use marks the boundary between engagement and detachment.

14 See McDowell (1994). His discussion of demonstrative senses and demonstrative concepts aims at just this point.

But once we allow that rules are used, and reasons proffered, from the standpoint of our engagement—from the inside—, then we need not fear that we have committed ourselves to an over-intellectualized conception of what it is to be engaged, just because we allow that we understand and can reflect on what we are doing.

Notice again that Dreyfus's picture—a picture he may take over from Heidegger (1927) and Merleau-Ponty (1945)—only counts as evidence against the idea that concepts and reasons and rules gear into perception and skilled action if we suppose that the intellectualist is right, that there is only one way for understanding to get into the act—namely, in the form of explicit deliberate judgement.

And notice that this way of rejecting intellectualism—on the part of Dreyfus, and other existential phenomenologists, and perhaps also Evans—pays a high price. For it must reject the idea that understanding and reason have any place at all outside the range of explicit deliberative reason, and so it has to give up the intellectualist's insight, namely that in our engaged, perceptual, and active lives, even when we are experts, even when we are skilled, our performance gives expression to knowledge, intelligence, and understanding. By accepting the intellectualist thesis that judgement alone is the only true way for concepts to gear in, Dreyfus and co. feel they are compelled to reject the idea that our lives as a whole, beyond the confines of deliberate exercise of reason and understanding, can be, or are, at one with our intellects.

What existential phenomenology may find difficult to appreciate—at least in Dreyfus's version of the position—is that conflict, disagreement, and disturbance of flow are themselves business-as-usual; they are normal moments in the way that even the expert carries on. We saw this in the language case. Expertise is not immunity; if anything, it is an evolved opportunity for new forms of vulnerability. Engagement is, as I shall put it, always manifestly *fragile*. That is, the liability to slip up, to get things wrong, is a built into the nature of the undertaking—of *any* undertaking. To go wrong is not, as a general rule, to stop playing the game—it is not the game's abeyance—it is rather a moment in the development of play. But let's go back to language. We don't stop communicating when we fail to understand each other. At least that is not usually the case. Misunderstanding is an opportunity for more communication. Clarifying, reformulating, trying again, like criticism, are things we use language to do. The fragility is intrinsic and manifest. It doesn't mark out the game's limits. It marks one of its modalities.

I stated earlier that understanding in the active and perceptual modes leaves no room for the application of understanding in the judgemental mode. I suggested this was a reason for thinking that judgement can't be operating behind the scenes when we perceive and act. But we can amend this now in light of our consideration of fragility. It is internal to the very character of our perceptual and active involvements that they are liable, not so much to breakdown, in Dreyfus's sense, as to error, confusion, and other stutter-steps that require precisely that one now *think* about what one is seeing and what one is doing. Judgement and thought can, in this sense, live cheek-by-jowl with perception and action without, therefore, getting in their way.

In any case, Dreyfus's criticism of intellectualism fails. But it does so precisely because he fails to break with the over-intellectualized conception of the intellect at the heart of intellectualism. Dreyfus's anti-intellectualism fails because intellectualism fails. It is, in reality, a species of intellectualism. Neither Dreyfus, nor his would-be opponent, can do justice to the ways in which understanding operates outside the narrow domain of explicit reasoning. Both sides fail to accommodate the phenomenon of fragility.

II

6 Concept pluralism: A genuine alternative to intellectualism

So let us now turn our attention to the prospects for framing a true alternative to intellectualism. What would such an alternative look like?

A genuine alternative to intellectualism will be pluralist in that it will reckon that there

are different legitimate and non-derivative modes of understanding, and so it will hold fast to the intellectualist's insight that understanding is in play everywhere in our lives even as it rejects the intellectualist thesis.

One resource for such a pluralism is Wittgenstein (1953). Wittgenstein proposed that a concept is a technique, and that understanding, therefore, is a form of mastery, akin to an ability. An important fact about abilities is that they can be exercised in a multiplicity of ways. I can exercise my understanding of what a house is by building one, looking at one, painting one, living in one, talking about one, or buying one. So, from this standpoint, there is nothing more surprising about the fact that my knowledge can find expression in what I do, as well as in my knowledge of a proposition, than there is in the fact that my ability to read gets exercised both when I read a novel and also when I blush at the words on the bathroom wall.

This idea also helps us explain the unity of understanding. If concepts can be applied in walking the dog as well is in writing a treatise about dogs, what is the connection between these two self-standing and non-derivative modes of exercise of something that, surely, is a single conceptual capacity: an understanding of the concept *dog*? What gives unity to this understanding?

The idea that understanding a concept is mastery of a technique, a mastery that has multiple, distinct, context-sensitive ways of finding expression, helps here. One way to express understanding of *dog* is to talk and write about dogs. Another way is to be able to spot dogs on the basis of their appearance. Still another is to work or play comfortably with dogs. And the list goes on and on. We put our singular understanding of what dogs are to work in these different ways, and the understanding consists in the ability to do (more or less) all of that.

We are now in a position to appreciate that the claim that perception and action are, with judgement, non-derivative, original modes of understanding does not entail that these modes are independent of each other. The idea that the unity of a concept is a matter of unity-in-ability helps bring this out. The fact that perception isn't beholden to judgement for its conceptuality doesn't mean that there could be perception in the absence of capacities for judgement. After all, typically, you can't be said to know a concept if you can't apply it in normal perceptual settings. Can you know what a tomato is if you are incapable of any active or perceptual engagement with tomatoes?

But we should also be careful. In so far as our concepts have unproblematic unity, then, on this Wittgensteinian view, this is because they are exercises of common abilities—abilities which are, of their nature, such as to admit a genuine multiplicity of expressions. But the unity of our concepts is not something that we can always take for granted.

Is there *one* concept of dog, or several, brought to life in different situations and subcultures at different times, for different purposes? Is there unity or just fragmentation? Is this a shared understanding? These are important questions, not for philosophy, particularly, but for culture. Look at the changes that have taken place in our thinking about *matter* over the last few hundred years. Or, to give a different kind of example, about *gender*. We have no choice but to work it out as we go along.

And crucially, there is no standpoint outside our thinking, talking, writing, persuading, imposing, regulating, prescribing and also describing, from which these questions can be adjudicated. This doesn't make the existence of dogs a matter of social construction. (Of course, dogs are, literally, bred and so constructed by us.) No, surely dogs have a mind-independent nature. But it does mean that it is hard and creative and unending work to bring that reality into focus in our shared thought, talk, perception, and activity.

There is no standpoint outside our thoughtful practices from which to ask after our own concepts. For our concepts are our own tools and techniques. This is where Frege went wrong. He seems to have thought that the only way to achieve *objectivity*—that is, sharability, articulability, and lawfulness—was by supposing concepts were out there, indifferent to how we grasp or understand them. In fact, they supervene on our grasping, negotiating, communicat-

ive activity. Frege made no allowance for fragility.

7 Concepts are skills of access

But can we say more than just that concepts are abilities? Abilities to do what? Well, we've already said: to talk and see and use and judge, and so on.

But I think we can do better. To do so, I draw on the actionist approach to perception developed in earlier work (Noë 2004, 2012). To begin to organise an answer, consider two familiar facts about visual perception. The first is that, as Euclid noticed, when a solid opaque object is seen, it is never seen in its entirety at once. Things always have hidden parts. The second is that the visible world is cluttered with all manner of stuff. Things get in the way, the view is interrupted, occlusion is the norm.

And yet, despite these striking limitations, we don't experience the world as cut off from us, inaccessible to vision, blocked from perception. The partial, fragmentary, and perspective-bound character of our visual access to the world is not a limit on what we see, a marking off of our liability to blindness; it is, rather, the very manner of our seeing. This is fragility again.

Not seeing through the solid and opaque, as if it were transparent, is not a perceptual failing but rather an accomplishment. And relatedly: we belong to the cluttered environment ourselves. We are not confined to what is projected to a point. We explore. And it is that exploring, that doing, that is the seeing. The seeing is not the occurrence of a picture or representation in the head; it is, rather, the securing of comprehending access, thanks to our possession of a specific repertoire of skills, to what there is. The generic modality of the way the world shows up in perception is not *as represented*, but rather *as accessible* (as I argue in Noë 2012). This is why our inability to see things from all sides at once, or to experience a thing's colour in all possible lighting conditions at once, is no obstacle to the presence of whole objects and colours in our experience.

The immediate environment is present in visual perception, not because it projects to the eyes, but because the person, by means of the use of his or her eyes as well as other forms of movement and negotiation, has access to that to environment. Presence is availability, and its modalities—visual as opposed to tactual, for example—are fixed by the things we need to do, the negotiations, to bring and keep what is there in reach. Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus* (1921), said that the eye is a limit of the visual field. But this is wrong: the adjustments of the eye, the need to adjust the eye, difficulties in adjusting the eye, are given in the way we see. Wittgenstein's point, I suppose, was that the eye doesn't see itself seeing (unless you look in a mirror). But here's a different model: seeing is like what an outfielder does. To say that the eye is not *in* the visual field is a bit like saying that the body of the outfielder is not in the field of play. But in fact the eye and the head and the hand and the arm and the glove are all in the field of play. And what we call *fielding the play* is precisely a temporally extended transaction in that whole environment. And the basis of the environment's availability to this or that modality of exploration, beyond the fact that it is there, is our possession of the skills, abilities, and capacities to secure our access to it. The occluded portions of the things we see are there for us, present to us, thanks to our skilful ability to move and bring them into view. Perception is fragile.

John Campbell, writing in a related context (2002), has said that we shouldn't think of the brain as representing the world; we should think of it as making the adjustments that, as he puts it, keep the pane of glass between you and the world clean and clear, as if it were continuously vulnerable to becoming opaque.

My thought is that *we* (not our brains) need continuously to make adjustments to keep the world in view, and to maintain our access to the world around us.

But I add: the character of the world's presence itself is precisely a function not only of what there is, but of what we know how to do, and what we do, and what we must always of necessity stand ready to do, just in case, to pre-

serve our access. You need to squint and peer and adjust to see things far away; and this makes a difference to how those things show up.

This is one reason why it is a mistake to suppose that we think of the adjustments that belong to the ways we bring the world into focus as the brain's work. No, it is our work, even if most of it is low-level, unattended, and done automatically. For it is this work that gives experience the quality that it has.

The scene is present for us in the manner of a field of play. This is a fragile presence. Its presence is not given to us alone thanks to what might happen in our brains, thanks to neural events triggered by optical events. Its presence is achieved thanks to what we know how to do. The basis of our skilful access to the world is, precisely, our possession of *skills of access*.

And this, finally, is what I propose concepts are. They are skills of access, or rather, a species of such. They are not so much devices by which we make the world intelligible, as much as they are the techniques by which we secure our contact with the world, in whatever modality. From this point of view, concepts like *dog* and *matter* are of a piece with other skills of access such as the not-quite-articulable sensorimotor skills we skilfully deploy as we navigate the scene with our thinking bodies.

From this standpoint, it is worth emphasizing that there is no theoretically interesting cleavage between seeing and thinking (as already argued in Noë 2012). Seeing is thoughtful and thought is perceptual at least in so far is it is, like seeing, a skilful negotiation with what there is, as just another modality of our environment-involving transactions. Presence, after all, is always in a modality—that is, it is always dependant on our repertoire of skills. And it is always a matter of degree. The hidden portions of the things we see *show up for us*, as does the space behind our head, and even spaces further afield. We have access—skill-based, partial, perspective-bound, and fragmentary—to it all.

Perception and thought, from the actionist perspective, differ as sight and touch differ. They are different *styles* of access to the world around us.

8 We use concepts to take hold of things, not to represent them

Let us come back to the more particular line of investigation that has been our concern.

The intellectualist is quite right that in so far as seeing is expressive of understanding, this is because we bring concepts to bear in our seeing. But the intellectualist is mistaken in holding that this is because we categorize what we see, in the mode of judgement, by applying concepts. It is rather that we see *with* concepts. Concepts are techniques by which we take hold and secure access. Their job is not to represent what is there; their job is to enable what is there to be present to us. You can't see the laser-projector if you don't know what a laser-projector is. Your possession of the concept is a condition on the laser-projector's showing up for you. It is the ability that lets you encounter what is in fact there.

Back to the example of text: your grasp of the relevant concepts enables you to read (to see what is there). Not because it gives you the resources to interpret or decode (although it does give you that). But because knowledge lets what might otherwise be unseen come into view. Knowledge can also, correspondingly, disable us. Your reading knowledge, for example, can make it difficult or even impossible to see the squiggles, the "mere marks", which are also always there whenever you read.

And so across the board: we don't apply concepts in judgement to what we see in order to represent things; our possession of the concepts is what enables us to make contact with them themselves. We see *with* our concepts. They are themselves techniques or means for handling what there is. Think of the concept in perception not as a category, or a representation, but a way of *directly picking up* what is there (to re-use and rehabilitate Gibson's 1986 idea).

And so also for the active modality. My understanding gets expressed in what I *do* and it gets expressed directly—for example, I exercise my knowledge of teacups in the *way* I handle this cup; I grasp the cup with my hands, and also with my understanding. My under-

standing gets put to work in the fact that I am able to do this, in the fact that I know how to do it.

Understanding, I would urge, is put to work, in these doings, *directly*. We don't need to suppose an action is skilful or knowledgeable or expressive of understanding only when it is guided, as it were from without, by propositional knowledge—as if the understanding couldn't inform our practical knowledge and our action directly.

And we are now finally in a position to understand why this is the case: for then we would be owed an account of how understanding is put to work in judgement. And here, we are just thrown back on what we can do to bring what is there for us into focus, to achieve its presence.

9 Conclusion: The significance of fragility

The world shows up for us in perception and thought, but it has a fragile presence. It shows up in very much in the same way that what a person means shows up for us when we are in conversation, to return to the language example. Misunderstanding, outright failure to understand, are always manifestly live possibilities. It isn't only solid opaque objects that fail to reveal themselves in their totality to the single glance. What we are given, always, is an opportunity or affordance for further effort, engagement, negotiation, and skilful transaction. The world is present to thought and perception not as a represented totality—an idea in our minds, a representation in our brains—but as the place in which we find ourselves, where we live, where we work. The world is a big place, and so there is a lot for us to do if we are to secure our footing on its slippery grounds. But a slippery ground is still a ground, and we need to secure our footing.

Presence—in thought and experience—is fragile, in other words. Philosophy has been strangely resistant to fragility. Fragility is not fallibility. The point about fragility is that it is manifest. An object's colour shows up for us as something with hidden aspects; it presents itself to us as something that is always on the cusp of variation, always ready to change with the least alteration in our perspective or in the conditions of viewing. A colour, no less than a solid object, has hidden aspects. We don't experience these aspects as isolated atoms—as if we were confined to what the camera sees. What we see, what we experience, outstrips anything that can be understood in optical terms alone. For we see, we experience, and we also think about, a world that manifestly goes beyond what can be taken in a glance. Our skills—our understanding, to use the term that has organised so much of this discussion—gives us access to what there is.

That access is achieved, but not once and for all. It is not as though we consume the world in encountering it so that now we can make do with what is inside us. Access is a work in process. Presence is fragile, manifestly so; but it is robust.

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