

## Chapter 9

# Husserlian Intentionality and Everyday Coping

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*Abstract: In his book Being-in-the-World Hubert Dreyfus charges that Husserl's conception of intentionality cannot account for the practice of everyday coping skills, while Heidegger's thought can. Drawing from the third section of Ideas II as well as other of Husserl's works, I pull together a Husserlian intentional analysis of everyday coping to show that Dreyfus is wrong.*

Hubert Dreyfus' book *Being-in-the-World* has appeared to some acclaim. It presents a provocative interpretation of the first division of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Reviewers have praised its clarity, scope, lack of jargon and contemporary philosophical relevance.<sup>1</sup> That the book is bound to spur philosophical debate can only be seen as an additional virtue, they note. In this paper I want to enter into this debate.

I do not wish to contest Dreyfus' interpretation of Heidegger, however. Instead I want to take issue with Dreyfus' presentation of Husserl's thought. One of the merits of the book is its focus on what Dreyfus calls everyday coping, an important aspect of human life too often ignored by philosophy. This is the way we deal with objects in the mundane everyday activities that are central to our lives, although we do not usually pay too much attention to them. His thesis is that our capacity for everyday coping lies in our mastery of certain background skills and practices. He contends that Heidegger comes close to capturing how we interact with the world this way in *Being and Time*. On the other hand, he charges, these background skills and practices not only are not but cannot be explained in terms of Husserl's concept of intentionality.

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<sup>1</sup> See Steven Galt Crowell, Review of *Being-in-the-World* by Hubert Dreyfus, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 90:7 (1993): 373-377 and Joseph P. Fell, Review of *Being-in-the-World* by Hubert Dreyfus, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 31:2 (1993): 306-307.

It is not the case, I contend, that everyday coping skills are beyond the scope of a Husserlian intentional analysis. To show that this is so I will point to various places in Husserl's writing where he does analyse the type of engagement with one's surroundings that is involved in what Dreyfus calls everyday coping. In particular I want to concentrate on the second volume of Husserl's *Ideas*, for reasons I will soon discuss.

### I. The Type of Consciousness Involved in Everyday Coping

It will help to have a concrete example of everyday coping to use in my analysis. Heidegger's favorite example of what Dreyfus calls everyday coping is the way we pick up and use a hammer in the course of repairing or building something. Dreyfus also uses this example, but he comes up with another example of everyday coping that captures perhaps even better the complexity of the sorts of skills involved: driving a car. In driving a car I operate a lot of complicated machinery and take in a great deal of constantly changing information about what is happening around me, many times without thinking about it at all. The example I want to use through most of this paper, however, is of a far more basic type of everyday coping: walking. Imagine the following case: I am walking on a partially cleared path in the woods and up ahead of me is a fairly large rock that is embedded in the dirt. Most likely I will walk up, step over the rock and continue on my way without thinking about it at all.

Let us examine this example a little more closely. How does the rock before me in the path enter into my consciousness? I said before that I step over it without thinking about it. This means that I am not directly aware of the rock. I could *become* aware of it, of course, before I step over it, while I am stepping over it or even immediately after I have stepped over it. But the point is that I do not need to be directly aware of the rock in order to step over it and continue on my way.

Perhaps it is this feature of everyday coping experiences like these that leads Dreyfus to claim that we are not conscious of the objects we encounter in the course of our everyday practical activities. Dreyfus even goes so far as to claim regarding Heidegger's description of Being-in-the-World: "we are not to think of Dasein as a conscious subject."<sup>3</sup> Now Dreyfus cannot mean by this that we are literally not

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<sup>3</sup>Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 13.

conscious in our everyday coping activities. He has said as much elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> The point that Dreyfus must be trying to make, applied to this example, is that I am not conscious *of the rock*.

Now if Dreyfus were correct in claiming that we are not conscious *at all* of the objects we engage ourselves with in our everyday coping, then a Husserlian intentional analysis of this phenomenon truly would be ruled out. Intentionality is by definition consciousness *of* something, so Husserl's concept of intentionality cannot be used to account for completely unconscious processes.

However, it simply is not the case that we are not conscious at all of the objects that we encounter in our everyday coping. The important point to notice is that there are two meanings that can be given to the phrase "conscious of." In the narrow sense to be conscious of something means to be directly aware of it. But there is a broader sense to this phrase. In this broader sense to be conscious of something, to have it "in" consciousness, means to be aware of it in any way at all, whether directly or indirectly. In this broader sense (the sense used by Husserl, I will show) I must be conscious of the rock lying in my path. This is proved by the fact that if I were not aware of the rock in some fashion I would most probably trip over it. It is a fairly large rock, remember. This sort of mishap is always possible, of course, no matter how well developed our everyday coping skills are. How a mishap like this illuminates the role indirect awareness plays in our everyday coping can be shown in another experience I assume everyone has had once or twice. I am walking and am not aware that there is a step in front of me. I stride ahead, my foot drops down, catching me by surprise, and my body lurches forward. Now I do not lurch like this because I do not know how to walk down steps, or have temporarily forgotten how to. My background coping skills are still present, but I just do not see the step. This is a misleading way of speaking, however, because I normally do not see the steps when I successfully negotiate them. Usually I am indirectly aware of the step beneath my feet as I descend. In this case I am not aware of it at all.

That there is a difference between these two circumstances shows that in successful everyday coping we are aware in some sense of the objects we interact with. We are conscious of them in the second broader sense of being conscious I mentioned earlier. And since everyday coping does fall into the range of conscious

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<sup>3</sup>"Heidegger does not deny that we are conscious." Hubert Dreyfus, "Husserl's Epiphenomenology" in *Perspectives on Mind*, Herbert R. Otto and James A. Tuedio, eds. (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1988), 86.

activity, there is no reason in principle why everyday coping skills could not be subjected to an intentional analysis of the type Husserl engages in. But does Husserl actually analyze this fundamental level of human experience?

## II. Everyday Coping in *Ideas II*

Dreyfus suggests that Husserl only belatedly became interested in this important dimension of human functioning in his last work, the *Crisis*. In fact Husserl describes this underlying submerged level of consciousness in *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis*, in *Experience and Judgment*, as well as in *Ideas II* and other places.<sup>4</sup> In this paper I want to concentrate mainly on Husserl's treatment of this theme in the third section of *Ideas II* because here it is explicit that Husserl is analysing the way we are aware of the world in practical experience. In this section of *Ideas II* Husserl analyses the constitution of the human spiritual world, or the world experienced in the personalistic attitude and "we can also denote the personal or motivational attitude as the *practical* attitude" (IV: 190/199). Husserl contrasts this attitude to the naturalistic attitude adopted by the natural scientist and claims that the surrounding world encountered in the personalistic attitude is ontologically prior to the more rigidly structured world of the natural scientific attitude (IV: 281-301/294-316).<sup>5</sup> In *Experience and Judgment* and the volume on passive synthesis Husserl does not make this distinction between the contemplation and praxis so explicit.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Dagfinn Føllesdal, for instance, has located two interesting manuscripts where Husserl analyses practical action in some detail. See Dagfinn Føllesdal, "Husserl and Heidegger on the Role of Actions in the Constitution of the World" in *Essays in Honour of Jaako Hintikka*, Esa Saarinen, et al, eds. (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), 373, 375.

<sup>5</sup>Although it is somewhat difficult to understand Husserl's basis for making this claim in *Ideas II*, it foreshadows one of the central themes of the *Crisis*. See Kristana Arp, review of *Ideas II* by Edmund Husserl, *Husserl Studies*, 8:1 (1991).

<sup>6</sup>It is true that in *Experience and Judgment* Husserl does identify the prepredicative level of experience as that of the life world (Section 10). But he is interested mainly in the role prepredicative experience plays in founding logical judgment. Husserl hardly discusses how practical interests structure the underlying levels of experience in *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis*, although he asserts that they do (XI: 150). Besides, *Experience and Judgment*, put together in 1935, might conceivably been influenced by *Being and Time*, whereas this part of *Ideas II*, composed for the most part in 1913, could not have been. Indeed the question with *Ideas II* is the reverse—whether it had a formative influence on *Being and Time*. Husserl did send a copy of it to Heidegger early in 1925 (IV: XVI-Translators'

Many passages from *Ideas II* show that, contrary to what Dreyfus seems to think, Husserl is not committed to the position that a person is always explicitly aware of the objects encountered in perception. One particularly apt way he puts it here is that sometimes an object only “knocks at the door of consciousness” (IV: 219-220/231; see also 186/195, 216/227, 252/264, 278/291). But, it is fair to ask, if we are not explicitly aware of the objects encountered in everyday coping, then how are we aware of them?

One key to a Husserlian analysis of everyday coping can be found in the concept of motivation that he develops in this third section of *Ideas II*. He uses this concept of motivation to capture the way that we relate to objects in the personalistic attitude. This relation is experienced quite differently in the personalistic attitude and the naturalistic attitudes. From a natural scientific point of view our perceptions are *caused* by various factors. But the surrounding world of the personalistic attitude is experienced in a decisively different way: objects in the surrounding world are seen to motivate our perceptions of them; they do not cause them. Similarly, one particular perception, thought or memory motivates rather than causes another.

To show how motivation structures perception I will cite one quote from this section of *Ideas II*. Here Husserl describes what he designates “the *relation of motivation* between persons and things”:

Phenomenologically, the unities of things (the noematic unities) are points of departure for more or less “strong” tendencies. Already as conscious but not yet grasped (hovering in the background of consciousness), they draw the subject to themselves, and if the “stimulating power” is sufficient, the Ego “follows” the stimulus, “gives in” and turns in that direction. Then the Ego exercises on these things explicating, conceiving, theoretically judging, evaluating and practical activities. They now engage its interest in their being and their attributes, in their beauty, agreeableness, and usefulness. (IV: 189/199)

What Husserl says here can be explicated in terms of my example with the rock quite easily. As I have already established, in this example I am conscious of the rock only in the broad sense of the word. As Husserl says here, the rock hovers in the background of my consciousness. I could of course become explicitly aware of

it. Something about it might draw my attention to it. I might notice something unusual about it—its color, say. I might appreciate its beauty. If I were a geologist looking for specimens or a farmer building a rock wall, I might size it up for my purposes. These are evaluative or practical activities of the sort Husserl refers to in this quote. But I need do none of these things. In particular, I need pay no attention to it at all in order to step over it.

To apply Husserl's concept of motivation in this context, the presence of the rock in the path, instead of motivating a specific explicit interest in it, simply motivates me to step over it. This is the type of "doing which precedes the turning toward" that Husserl mentions in *Experience and Judgment*. He discusses there how I can move my eyes without thinking about moving them or about what I see (Section 19). In the same way I can move other parts of my body without being aware of how or why.

What Husserl says in *Ideas II* about the type of awareness that we have of objects at the level equivalent to our everyday coping can be connected with what Husserl says throughout his work about the horizon of perception. In the *Crisis* and elsewhere Husserl describes how an "external horizon" of other objects is always experienced as co-present with any particular object (VI: 165/162). Likewise, here in *Ideas II* Husserl discusses how in witnessing a typical street scene, one hardly notices the individual events and objects, but they nonetheless "predelineate the horizon of my lived experience" (IV: 271/284). The objects we are involved with in everyday coping remain concealed within this horizon for the most part. They are always experienced in terms of a wider context (and not in a context-free way, as Dreyfus interprets Husserl to hold).

Not only is any particular object encountered within a context of other objects and possible objects, my relation to it is always interwoven with the relations I have to these other objects. These manifold intentional relations are relations of motivation in Husserl's sense. They are interconnected to the extent that Husserl says that there is an "infinite field of motivation included in every outer perception" (IV: 224/236). To apply Husserl's characterization here to my example: the motivation exercised on me by the rock is related to the motivation exercised on me by the path. The rock has the meaning for me of something to be stepped over because it is in the middle of the path. It would not have this significance in the middle of a field or meadow.

The external horizon of surrounding objects and the field or web of motivations involved in all perceptual experience in everyday coping must be part of what Husserl in another passage calls the background of comportment:

On the other hand, concerning the constitution in consciousness of the object prior to the turning of the attention and the taking of a specific position regarding it, we are referred back to the constitution in consciousness of previous objects, to previous acts of attention, and perhaps to previous position-takings; we are referred back to the data of sensation, to the references back and forth which depend on them, etc. Ultimately we arrive at the “obscure,” “hidden,” representations and representational complexes. Insofar as attention plays a role for this constitution of transcendent unities and multiplicities, we have there implicitly an Ego that is accomplishing some kind of comportment. The ultimate, however, is a *background that is prior to all comportment* and is instead presupposed by all comportment (IV: 278-279/291).

This background of comportment has intriguing parallels to the background understanding that Dreyfus sees Heidegger’s distinctive brand of phenomenology as setting out to reveal.<sup>8</sup> This concept of the background, which is much in use in contemporary philosophy of mind, can be found throughout Husserl’s work.

This quote also brings out the important point that for Husserl the perceptual objects we encounter in our everyday coping not only are embedded in a spatial horizon, but are implicated in a temporal horizon as well. This is the horizon of “actual and possible praxis” he speaks of in the *Crisis* and elsewhere (VI: 145/142).<sup>9</sup> In many cases it is our extensive prior experience with objects of this kind that allows us to relegate them to the background of consciousness.<sup>10</sup> This might not be so evident with the example of the rock I have been using. But it certainly is the case with technological devices like can-openers and gearshifts.

Husserl’s analysis of the type of intentionality operating within the personalistic attitude in *Ideas II* offers many fascinating hints about how our past experience with

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<sup>8</sup>Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 32.

<sup>9</sup>“manual activity . . . creates its own horizon of familiarity” (EU: Section 11).

<sup>10</sup>Dreyfus, of course, is aware of this. He has written about the different stages involved in acquiring coping skills. He claims that something like Husserlian intentionality is involved only at the novice stage. Obviously I disagree. See Dreyfus, “Husserl’s Epiphenomenology,” 87-91.

everyday objects feeds into and supports our present competence with regard to them. He denies that this learning process is an explicit one that involves reasoning. I do not, he says, conclude on the basis of past experiences what I should do in the future (IV: 266/278). Rather I acquire a habitual mode of dealing with things like these. And this habit involves “not an expecting in the proper sense but a *protention* directed towards the future occurrence” which remains in “background consciousness” (IV: 256/268).

The use of the word *protention* ties what he says here to his general account of time-consciousness and suggests that habitual behavior does not involve discrete moments of separate occurrences. In habitual action he says: “each feature of the intentional object refers back to similar experiences” (IV: 266/278). In utilizing everyday coping skills, the present instance is part of a bridge that stretches from past to future experiences of the same kind. What Husserl says about this distinctive temporal dimension of habitual action can be tied into his painstaking analysis of retention in *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis*. He describes there how past experience is retained in implicit intentionality in retention to form a “sleeping” horizon sphere (XI: 173/178).

So, although this temporal horizon of past and future practice is always in place, we are not, or certainly not usually, directly aware of it. What Husserl implies here about our general lack of awareness of the connection of our present actions to our past practices can be tied into another issue. Dreyfus states more than once that Husserl equates the background we draw on in everyday coping to a set of beliefs or belief system, in the *Crisis*, at least, when, according to him, Husserl finally gets around to addressing this issue.<sup>10</sup>

Here in *Ideas II* Husserl states explicitly that the relations of motivation that structure our interactions within the surrounding world of the personalistic attitude many times operate below the level of belief: “By all means there are hidden motivations. Even without our performing acts of belief, they enter into motivations” (IV: 224/236). It is true that Husserl says elsewhere that there is a level of belief that is presupposed by practical action, indeed all conscious activity. But this is not any specific belief or set of beliefs, rather the “*universal ground of belief in a world*” (EU: Section 7). When I reach out to grasp something, he says,

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<sup>10</sup>See Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 5, 22, 30, 85, 249. Dreyfus bases this claim on his interpretation of Section 40 of the *Crisis*, where Husserl discusses what David Carr translates as “networks of validities” (VI: 151-154/148-151). I do not see how these networks of validities are equivalent to beliefs, though.

I have the certainty that it was already there, and that the things that surround it are there likewise. But this “passive belief in being” is of a different order than beliefs about specific states of affairs.

Not only does our everyday coping behavior not necessarily rest on beliefs we have formed, our beliefs themselves often are shaped by the types of hidden motivations operating in habitual behavior. We believe many things out of habit; we do not always subject our beliefs to rational analysis. However, a belief, which in Husserl’s terms is a position-taking, at least can be subjected to rational analysis. In places here Husserl implies that some of the hidden motivations structuring behavior like coping behavior operate below the level of rationality. They are “a-rational,” “passive,” “latent,” and “blind” (IV: 222/234, 248/260, 277/289). But deeply buried in awareness as they may be, they are not beyond the scope of consciousness. Even motivations that are “unconscious,” not only unnoticed but “unnoticeable” are still “present in consciousness,” according to Husserl (IV: 222-223/234).

### **III. Can the Nature of Everyday Coping Be Made Explicit?**

This intentional analysis of everyday coping I have drawn from Husserl’s work, although rudimentary, highlights some important features of our everyday coping experiences. First, we are not directly aware of the objects we encounter in this mode, but we are aware of them nonetheless. Secondly, this background awareness is tied into both the spatial horizon of perception and a personal horizon of praxis stretching into the past and future. But the connection of our present actions to our past practice is hardly ever explicit enough to be encapsulated in the form of a belief.

Even to lay out the beginnings of an intentional analysis of everyday coping as I have done here shows that Dreyfus is wrong to claim that it is impossible to account for this important level of human functioning in terms of a Husserlian concept of intentionality. But there is another even more basic challenge to Husserl’s philosophical project that Dreyfus mounts in his book that I want to address before I close. Essentially, Dreyfus charges that Husserl is wrong to think that the underlying structures of perception can be analysed at all, because the way that perception functions in everyday coping, which is the way it functions most of the time, cannot be made explicit.

Actually, there are two separate claims that Dreyfus makes in this regard. One is that the way that we function in our everyday coping cannot be made explicit without interfering drastically with our ability to function. The other is that the way perception functions in everyday coping cannot be made explicit at all. Now it is true that the aim of Husserl's phenomenology is to make the entire structure of intentionality explicit in some sense of the word. So if Dreyfus were right in making this larger claim, the prospects for Husserlian phenomenology would look bleak.

Let me first examine the first form this claim about explicitness takes for Dreyfus. It is that we could no longer function if the background skills and practices we draw on in our everyday functioning were made completely explicit. Now there is a good deal of truth in this claim. Of course, in the example I have been using in this paper this is not so clearly evident. Even if someone were to call the rock lying in my path to my attention, it would not impede my progress down the path. But could I become directly aware at this moment not only of the rock, but of the entire perceptual context working to give this situation the meaning it has for me? This is doubtful. To become completely aware of the entire horizontal context of perception in other cases of everyday coping—for instance, driving a car—is much more difficult and even potentially dangerous.

But why is it necessary or even desirable to perform an analysis of everyday coping practices while we are presently engaged in them? It is a central tenet of Husserlian phenomenology that the perspective that should be assumed for philosophical analysis is radically different than the attitude we assume in our everyday life. The point of performing what Husserl calls the transcendental reduction is to shatter the hold that the natural attitude originally and usually has over us. It is not that phenomenology scorns the natural attitude. It is to a great extent what it wants to study. It is just that one cannot study the natural attitude without removing oneself from it and taking a new perspective on it. So while Dreyfus may be right that one cannot make the intentional structure of everyday coping explicit *while* we are presently engaged in it, this fact does not undermine Husserl's philosophical project.

But Dreyfus in other moments seems to make the even stronger claim that not only is it impossible to make the way we function in our everyday coping activities explicit without impairing our ability to perform them, but that it is impossible to make them explicit at all, even presumably at the level of reflection. Actually, some of the things that I have said here imply that even for Husserl this is true at least regarding some of the motivations underlying our comportment. Certain

motivations, he says in the text of *Ideas II*, are so hidden as to be “unconscious” or “unnoticeable.” But an important distinction must be made. In these pages he is talking about the type of personal reflection we can engage in about ourselves as personal, empirical egos. In this type of reflection I might get clear about some of the underlying context of my behavior, but not according to Husserl here, all of it.

But personal reflection is fundamentally different from phenomenological reflection. In the type of reflection involved in phenomenological analysis, I attempt to get clear not about *my* hidden motivations, but about the way hidden motivations operate in perception in our everyday coping in general. Phenomenological analysis proceeds at the eidetic level. It aims only to make the forms and structures of everyday coping activities explicit at this level of generality. And in performing a structural analysis of consciousness one is not necessarily limited to one’s immediate awareness. In another paper in this volume Tom Nenon suggests that one can infer the existence of motivational structures that may not be directly accessible to reflection due to their connection to other aspects of experience that are (Tom Nenon, “Husserl’s Theory of the Mental”, pp. 229 ff., below).

In any case, Heidegger and Husserl are in the same boat in this regard. Dreyfus runs the risk of contradicting himself in claiming that the structures of everyday coping cannot be made explicit at all. Certainly he must hold that *Heidegger* has succeeded in making how we relate to the world in everyday coping explicit, in at least some sense of the word, in *Being and Time*. At stake here, then, is the issue of just what type of phenomenological analysis this fundamental level of human action is susceptible to. I can certainly see someone claiming that Heidegger on the whole offers a more sensitive, nuanced, holistic analysis of everyday coping than Husserl does (not that I want to endorse this claim here). To make this claim is different than to claim that the features of our everyday practical world and our everyday coping practices cannot be made explicit at all, or that this aspect of human experience is completely beyond the reach of Husserlian intentional analysis.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>I want to thank the Release Time Committee of Long Island University, Brooklyn for their assistance in making it possible for me to complete this work.