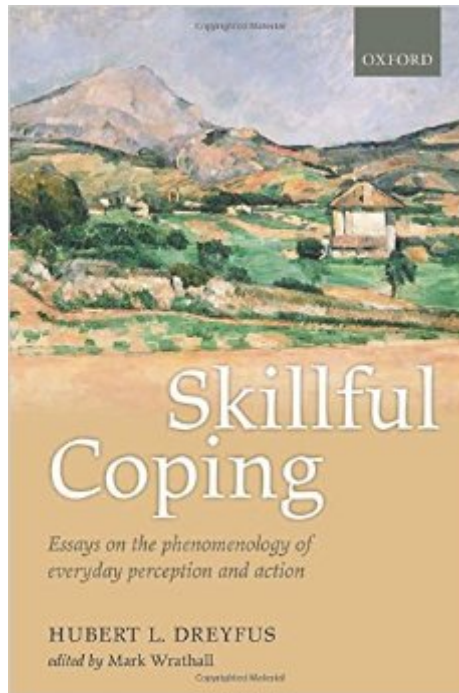


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Skillful Coping: Essays On The Phenomenology Of Everyday Perception And Action



Synopsis

For fifty years Hubert Dreyfus has addressed an astonishing range of issues in the fields of phenomenology, existentialism, cognitive science, and the philosophical study of mind. Dreyfus has inspired a whole generation of philosophers as he has creatively drawn on and clearly articulated the seminal works of thinkers like Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault. This volume presents a selection of Dreyfus's most influential essays on mind and action. The book begins with a model of skillful engaged human action, which informs much of Dreyfus's philosophy, and was developed in collaboration with Stuart Dreyfus. The volume then presents articles developing a critique of the representational model of the mind in analytical philosophy of mind and mainstream cognitive science. Dreyfus argues that representational models of mind offer an impoverished and distorting account of human engagement with the world. The chapters show this by addressing issues in philosophy of mind and the cognitive sciences through the skill model.

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Customer Reviews

This is a collection of papers written by Hubert Dreyfus (some with co-authors), gathered around his arguments against representational theories of mind, knowledge, and action. In their place, Dreyfus proposes a theory of embodied coping as our primordial interaction with the world, drawing principally on Merleau-Ponty's *phenomenology* and Heidegger's *being* structure. The editor rightly begins with a paper on Dreyfus's model of skill acquisition. The model, tellingly, may be best understood by the model that it opposes. The

more traditional model plots a continuous curve from beginner to expert, as the learner acquires a richer and richer theory of the skill domain in which he is learning. He begins with the basic ontology “the things that make up the domain” and the relationships and interactions among them. A beginning driver in fact does learn by understanding the accelerator, the brake, the speedometer, etc., and how each affects the behavior of the car itself, and he learns basic rules about when to press the accelerator, when to press the brake, and so on. And Dreyfus’s model doesn’t dispute that beginning stage. But, once the beginner advances, the Dreyfus model diverges: it isn’t a matter of consciously learning more rules (and more things), but instead a matter of embodying highly contextual heuristics and strategies that resist explication as rules. And the reason that they resist explication as rules is that they simply aren’t rules. Some of the best papers in this collection are ones that respond to the objection that, if those more expert skills are not rule-driven, they become mystical “beyond explanation or account altogether. This is the objection that is born of the traditionalist saying, in one way or another, that there must be rules governing the expert’s behavior and that we just haven’t found them yet: how could it be otherwise? Here Dreyfus calls especially on Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “motor intentionality” (and the new-to-me “energy landscapes” of the neuroscientist Walter Freeman). These more positive accounts are suggestive but still a bit sketchy, as presented here. The strength of Dreyfus’s work still lies in critique, I think. Even given Deep Blue, Watson, and other AI successes, the obstacles that AI researchers have found vexing (the “commonsense problem”, the “frame problem”) seem to justify the doubts Dreyfus raised with respect to the theoretical foundations of the AI project. Overall, this is a very good collection for understanding both Dreyfus’s critique of representationalism and the beginnings of a positive account in its place. Good, provocative stuff.

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