

Diversifying Syllabi 2016 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter

Article/Essay Title: “A Dancer Reflects” in *The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*

Author: Barbara Montero

Readability: Easy

Thesis: In this paper, Montero argues against the “principle of automaticity,” the view that expert performance is typified by a lack of reflection and thinking. She questions the arguments and neurological evidence used to support it and argues instead that expert performers evince a conscious, ongoing effort to improve and an openness to new approaches.

Key Definitions:

- *Principle of automaticity (PA):* Thinking about what you are doing during a performance interferes with expert skill, impairing performance. More specifically, PA is the view that, “When all is going well, expert performance significantly involves neither self-reflective thinking, nor planning, nor predicting, nor deliberation, nor mental effort” (304).

- *Self-reflective thinking:* Thinking about what you’re doing while you’re doing it.

- *Expert:* “I understand the term ‘expert,’ to apply to those that are generally recognized as experts in their fields and whose skills are usually thought to conform to the ten-year rule, which states that the journey from novice to professional typically takes ten years of intensive practice. And intensive practice means close to daily, extended practice with the specific aim of improving” (305). Examples include professional athletes, professional performing artists, experienced doctors and nurses and crucially *not* those who utilize everyday skills. See Brief Summary below.

Brief Summary:

- PA does not mean that expert action is natural/easy. Rather, it’s that the expert “doesn’t and shouldn’t think much about what she is doing; rather, the expert acts intuitively and automatically” (304). See also definition above.

- To argue against PA, we need to understand what we mean by expert. Montero’s account of expertise differs from proponents of PA because she does not think everyday skills count as expert skills: they do not involve strenuous, ongoing efforts to improve (e.g., everyday driving, crossing the street, etc.). These features are characteristic of expertise, which we find in professional athletes, professional performing artists, doctors/nurses. See definition of expert above.

- PA is focused on ideal performance (so not instances of breakdown) and allows for fleeting, but not extended thoughts about what the expert is doing (while maintaining her expertise).

- Considerations in favor of PA: For theorists like Dreyfus, the view is that beginners make conscious judgment using strict rules, but with expertise they don’t have to apply rules or make judgments at all. This seems to be supported by various cases from sports: where a coach tells a

player 'you're overthinking it'; 'just let it happen'. Chuck Knoblauch, a baseball player, apparently developed throwing problems by – so PA advocates claim – thinking too much about what he was doing, interfering with his ability to automatically carry out the action. The main argument for PA is that thinking about what you're doing interferes with or degrades performance (the argument from cognitive interference).

- Considerations against PA: Montero questions whether the Knoblauch case is well supported since players do not report their issues in a Dreyfus light. But there are various behavioral studies that seem to show that self-reflective thinking interferes with expert performance. Montero questions these results because during these experiments, experts (such as athletes) were told to think about specific aspects of their movements, but this doesn't show that thinking about what one is doing generally interferes with expert skill.

- Montero questions the conclusions of other studies that seem to show, based on neural activity, that once a skill is mastered, less mental effort is involved. This is because for a simple skill, we should expect practice to lead to less cognitive demands, but we shouldn't expect to see this for more complex skills, such as ballet. Montero also questions considerations from dual processing views that suggest that expert action does not require conscious awareness. One of the paradigm patient cases for this analysis was an individual who was only able to carry out simple, not complex, actions. Montero also questions the view that conscious thought arrives too late to prove relevant to the performance (e.g., in reaction to a high-speed, professional tennis serve) arguing that the evidence is too thin to be decisive.

Phenomenological considerations relevant to PA: Experts own testimony does seem to accord with PA and so does serve as prima facie support for PA. Montero questions whether expert ballet dancers would accept such an introspective account. On pages 312-313, Montero provides a phenomenological account of professional dance that challenges PA (focus/concentration on the music, about the performance, about a specific move, commands to oneself, predictions about other performers) that is very much worth drawing students' attention to. The best dancers are thinking about what they're doing because the best dancers are always striving to improve; an autopilot performance leads to doing the same thing in the same way.

- But isn't this all learned during practice, rather than the actual performance? Montero pushes back against this and cites a dancer's first-hand account to show that the improvement of performance quality requires concerted effort during the performance itself. Montero accepts that many decisions will be automatic and unconscious, but maintains that the best performances require deliberate, conscious thought in action to avoid flat performances (e.g., listening to someone read a paper vs. giving a lecture on her feet). We also shouldn't mistake the outsider's view that a given expert's performance is flawless: often for the performer herself, there are all sorts of things that can and do go wrong (because at least in ballet a performance is never flawless on Montero's view), and the performer is well aware of these flaws.

- Why do so many accept PA? It does seem to work for mundane skills, but, again, this doesn't apply to expert performers. It is often used as a strategy to relieve anxiety and tension for performers, but it may be that the best performers can tolerate anxiety involved in focusing on their own performance while performing. Or PA is accepted simply because people prefer ease to hard work!

Possible applications:

- Epistemology
- Phil mind
- Virtue ethics
- Aristotle
- Phenomenology
- Moral psychology (because Dreyfus says skillful coping is one of the most meaningful things we can do in our lives)
- Philosophy and sport
- Intro Phil
- Philosophy and/of education
- Moral expertise

Complementary texts:

- For a virtue ethics course, selections from *Intelligent Virtue* by Julia Annas
- *All things shining* by Dreyfus, or anything else by him on skillful coping
- Frankfurt's stuff on first and second order desires and the ideal of "wholeheartedness"
- Sarah Jane Leslie's piece on generics
- Michael Cholby on moral expertise
- Montero's new book *Thought in Action*
- Montero's Op Ed: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/09/the-myth-of-just-do-it/>
- Clip of Richard Sherman (football player) talking about how he improves his play: <http://kottke.org/14/05/richard-sherman-and-the-value-of-preparation>

Possible class activities:

- In-class or before class, draw out examples from personal experience: cases where students were "in the zone" in Dreyfus' sense, and cases of being an expert where it's more like Montero
- Watch *Being in the World* documentary. Do the experts in this documentary support Dreyfus' account (like he thinks they do) or Montero's?
- Get students to think about their own areas of expertise, do a field report as homework. Were they thinking while performing their activity? Do they agree with Dreyfus or Montero?
- Montero argues that Dreyfus' account might be right for everyday activities (ex. tying your shoes) because we don't try to improve on these. Get students to think about life hacks and try some out. If we are trying to improve everyday activities, do we start thinking like Montero predicts?
- Class discussion: how much do Montero and Dreyfus actually disagree?

Traditional texts this might replace?

- Any other critiques of Dreyfus
- Other pieces on "know-how"

