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## *In memoriam*

### **Hubert Dreyfus** **(Terre Haute, 1929 – Berkeley, 2017)**

On March 22, 2017 Hubert Dreyfus wrote on Twitter:

“Reports of my demise are not exaggerated.”

Unfortunately, this euphemistic formulation stayed for the death that took him away on that very day. The passed away is a philosopher whose professional mission was quite unique just as his personality was. He was, is, and will be widely acknowledged as a leading interpreter of great representatives of continental philosophy, especially Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. To make continental philosophy style accessible to analytical methodologies is a true achievement that we owe to him. The loss came to be expressed in reactions to his departing by many scholars around the world, particularly by those who were in some way connected to him and were at the time collaborating with him.

Hubert L. Dreyfus’ professional career was mostly affiliated with University of California at Berkeley, where he taught, starting in 1968, for nearly fifty years. Dreyfus received his BA and PhD from Harvard University. The relatively long path to doctorate has to do with the topic of his dissertation that unconventionally trespassed to the territory alien to the academia of the time. From 1960 to 1968 he taught philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

He is probably best known for his persisting critique of artificial intelligence as expounded in his seminal work *What Computers Can’t Do: A Critiques of Artificial Reason* that originally appeared in 1972 (MIT Press), and in its revised version that appeared twenty years later under the title *What Computers Still Can’t Do*. It was one of the early critiques, founded in the continental philosophy, of the newly rising cognitivism. Mostly inspired by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, he took a phenomenological disposition in discussing aspects of embodiment that will much later pave the way for outlining something that can be called “embodied cognitive science”. The philosophical handwriting developed in this work will be recognizable in much of what followed.

Collaboration with his older brother Stuart resulted in *Mind Over Machine: The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Era of the Computer* (The Free Press, 1986), which contains a “Prologue” that echoes Pascale’s famous thought “The Heart Has It Reasons That Reason Does Not Know”. It contrasts logic machines and intuitive expertise. Authors illuminate the phenomenon of ongoing, nonreflective performance. Though they do not exclude deliberation from the process that leads to acting and decision-making, they clearly put forward that “this deliberation does not require calculative problem solving, but rather involves critically reflecting on one’s intuitions” (1986, 32), and added

that “deliberative rationality is not opposed to intuition but based upon it. Put in its proper place, rational deliberation sharpens intuition” (Ibid., 205).

His other publications include *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. (MIT Press, 1990) in which he manages to find interpretative key for this extremely dense and difficult reading by applying common sense perceptions and examples from ordinary life. Like no one else, Dreyfus knowingly transcribes Heidegger's peculiar discourse in a way understandable to analytically trained philosophers, and English-speaking audience in general. In order to stress out close interconnectedness between the two philosophers, some critics have coined the hybrid ‘Dreidegger’.

Together with his close collaborator Charles Taylor, he published *Retrieving Realism* (Harvard UP, 2015) – a critique of the Cartesian conception of mind, and an affirmation of the idea that human thought is not reducible to propositional contents or any explicit form of representation, favouring instead bodily engagement and skilled coping as forms of background competence and a mode of knowing the world.

His book, co-authored with his former student, and year-long close collaborator Sean D. Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* – a New York Times bestseller – questions the meaning of life in the world without god(s). The absence of the sacred, however, need not be taken as a loss that necessarily leads to lostness. They seem to believe that it is various forms of creativity, in a wide range from physical achievements to producing works of art and literature, that can in a way fulfil the function of the lost. Their analysis is based on a meticulous reading of literary works as diverse as that of Aeschylus, Dante, Melville, David Foster Wallace or Elizabeth Gilbert, offering original interpretative insights of the new forms of ‘shining’.

In the “Introduction I” to Samuel Todes' *Body and World* (MIT Press, 2001) Dreyfus uses the opportunity to emphasize once again the importance of the key phenomenological concepts such as ‘embodied involvement’, ‘absorbed’, and ‘skilled coping’, and in particular the ‘nonconceptual’. For instance, he says: “It follows that the intentional content by means of which the aspects of perceptual objects are perceived must be nonconceptual.” (ibid., xxii) And as a kind of conclusion, Dreyfus adds: “In general, the experience of any characteristic of an object of practical perception is tied to the perceiver's *holistic body-set*.” (ibid.; emphasis added)

Among his devoted students and later collaborators also counts Eric Kaplan, a writer and producer of comedy TV series *The Simpsons*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *Futurama* (the character of “Professor Hubert Farnsworth” in the latter was named after Dreyfus). What Kaplan said about Dreyfus is something all of us who had the privilege of knowing Bert in person can agree on: “He was an inspiration in terms of an original thinker and mentor, and a lovable teacher. He was a gigantic influence on me as a human being, and as a student of philosophy.” Another student of his (Daria Mazey) describes nicely what might be taken as prototypical of the encounter-situations: “And then you show up for office hours, nervous to talk to such a renowned Professor, and he is so open and curious, so interested in your ideas also. He was generous with his time and thoughts and seemed to excel at living fully in the now.” Indeed, he was supportive and generously provided guidance in all the matters that emerged during conversation.

My first attempt to contact Prof. Hubert Dreyfus reaches back in 1995 as I was preparing a special issue of journal entitled “Rehabilitating the Body”. Needless to say, he was considered the ideal contributor but I was hesitant about sending an invitation because I suspected that such renown philosopher,

with so many commitments, might quite likely not respond to someone anonymous to him. But I was wrong. He kindly responded, accepted my invitation and delivered his article on time – at that time still with snail mail just before Christmas, which greatly enriched the festivities. The paper “The Current Relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Embodiment” (*Synthesis philosophica* (1–2/1995), pp. 35–50) focuses on two rarely discussed notions in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of perception, namely that of ‘intentional arc’, and (the tendency to achieve) a ‘maximum grip’.

An opportunity for a more intense exchange happened later, in 1999–2000 – the academic year I spent doing research as a Fulbright scholar at the UC Berkeley. Listening to him lecturing or arguing with his students opened for me new possibilities of (re)interpreting classic works of philosophy and understanding philosophy in general. Among other things, I was impressed with freshness and enthusiasm with which he discussed issues not new to him but enjoying somehow the reconfirmation of the rightness of insights, and their potentiality to reconfigure habits of thought. But what I appreciated most were our common lunches from time to time. He was genuinely curious to learn what I have to say about various issues, and was so attentive to the pieces of mine that I brought to these meetings. He read them carefully, commented, and suggested improvements. One could only be immensely grateful for the respect he gave to whoever happened to sit opposite to him and for sincerity he showed in conversing. Wonderful were also our occasional disagreements, which we took with humor, and at the end realize that they were not counterpointed but complementary. Every such meeting was memorable enrichment.

In early summer 2002 he kindly accepted my invitation to co-organize a workshop *Brain, Mind and World: Beyond Cognitivism*. It took place at the Interuniversity centre, Dubrovnik, Croatia. On his way to the venue he, with his family, made a stop at Split, on the Dalmatian coast, and the island of Hvar; he was impressed with the former (particularly the Diocletian palace) and enchanted with the latter. His talk at the Dubrovnik meeting left the lasting impact on everyone that attended it (I remember how some tourists, who happened to be in the town and learned about the IUC academic program from the tourist brochure, though non-philosophers, asked for the permission to attend and were grateful to be able to hear Professor Dreyfus live).

Years later, in 2011, as my edited volume *Knowing without Thinking: Mind, Action, Cognition, and the Phenomenon of the Background* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2012) was receiving final shape, I desired a representative introductory essay by a philosophical authority that would significantly add to the quality of the volume. My first preference was Hubert Dreyfus but, again, I judged very low the possibility that he would be willing to devote his (ever more precious) time for contributing to the project. Once again my skepticism proved unfounded, and his kindness and generosity reconfirmed. The dream of the editor came true: Dreyfus wrote “The Mystery of the Background *qua* Background”, and I had a privilege of publishing it as a sort of prolegomena to the collection. “To sum up”, – Dreyfus writes – “human beings when performing at their best are open to and absorbed in a non-propositional, non-intentional, background field of forces that Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty call the phenomenon of world. If one attempts to attend to these world forces they vanish. Thus, Heidegger defines phenomenology as the study of something not merely implicit, but ‘something that (...) lies hidden (...) but at the same time (...) belongs (...) to what shows itself so essentially as to constitute its meaning and its ground’ (1962, p. 59). “Thus the greatest phenomenologists

from Homer to Heidegger agree that ‘we can never look upon the phenomenon of world directly.’” (ibid.) Interestingly enough, his last, posthumously published work is *Background Practices: Essays on the Understanding of Being* (edited by M. Wrathall; Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017).

Dreyfus was truly a philosopher of our time; open, curious and sensitive to whatever emerged within the potential field of coping, and that encompasses all the forms of human existence. Nothing is trivial within the horizon where life takes place; everything philosophically matters if we have proper interpretative means to make it meaningful. That is why his philosophical concerns range from technical skills to dealing with computer and internet, from psychotherapy, education, and religious studies to management and film, etc. One had a feeling that the same kind of enthusiasm he displayed when discussing fundamental issues in continental philosophy he later in his career investigated in dealing with the phenomenon of media, particularly film.

His courses, such as ‘Existentialism in Literature and Film’ or ‘Man, God, and Society in Western Literature’, centred around the idea of God, were basically a platform for discussing existential issues (mostly with reference to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and literary work of Dostoyevsky, primarily *Brothers Karamazov*). These courses in existentialism and literature were not a manifestation of a late development of the aged philosopher; looking back at the early stages of his teaching career (Brandeis in the late fifties and MIT at early sixties of the past century) one finds that literary achievements were considered next to philosophical thought from early on; it is why Homer, Aeschylus, Dante, Cervantes, and other classics were represented in the programs next to great figures of the history of philosophy. Actually, his first published papers were on *Don Quixote* and Dante’s *Inferno* (the latter remained to be a topic of interest for over 50 years).

His former students and devoted followers, themselves now renown philosophers, such as Sean D. Kelly, Taylor Carman, Patrick Haugland, Mark Wrathall and other, evidently continue to cultivate the spirit they could receive from the great teacher. A very definite feeling is that the process is not reversible; that the intellectual seeds that Dreyfus implanted in our culture only gain on relevance as we get more exposed to living in the era that is more and more determined by technology. That culture is also richer for the fundamental concepts Dreyfus has granted new interpretation and fuller and more profound meanings, such as: being-in-the-world, skillful coping, real world understanding, common sense, holistic thinking, intuitive expertise, nonconscious competence, etc. They became essential tools in explaining and understanding our relation to the world.

Impact of his philosophy is remarkable, and it actually grew in the last decades; I hope he was aware of that, seeing how his ideas fruited and fertilized in the works of many of his students and followers all around the world, and how they made impact also on those outside philosophy, and even outside academy. I hope he was not only able to witness it but also enjoy the feeling – Well deserved, Bert!

Dreyfus often used to excuse himself for suffering from prosopagnosia – the inability to recognize human physiognomies or not remember them well; as to myself, I will never forget his kind and dear face that is now destined to exist in memento. Missed will be also many things in which he was unique: enthusiasm for doing philosophy, passion for teaching, openness and tolerance, sincere curiosity for alternative views, respect for others, understanding even when disagreeing, his supportiveness – and his humane warmth.

**Zdravko Radman**