

**Philosophy of Attention Session 13:
Attention in skillful action
(Bermudez 2017)**

⇒ **Skillful behavior and expert performance:** Are they explained by *mental states* or by automatic processes?

- Three answers:

Anti-intellectualist answer: Feeling, intuition, and/or automatic control.

- Answer purportedly supported by:
 - ◆ Choking /yipping
 - ◆ Expertise-induced amnesia
 - ◆ Expert-confabulation

Intellectualist answer: Reflection and self-awareness.

- Higher-order mental processes, which
 - (i) involve manipulation of propositions (intentions, beliefs, desires), and
 - (ii) coordinate lower-level processes (perceptual, affective, motor, mnemonic)

Attention Control Account: A higher-order, reflective, non-propositional process.

- **Structuring of attention** by a *sustained* higher-order, performance-related intention.
- Requires **working memory**, thus it is not automatic

- Purported evidence for anti-intellectualism:

- ◆ **Choking and yipping**

Reflection on ongoing behavior is harmful for performance.

Two explanations:

- a) **Explicit monitoring theory:** Reflection/focus on previously automated aspects
 - Disrupts intuitive tasks that do not require working memory – **yipping**
- b) **Distraction theory:** Reflection/focus on extraneous aspects
 - Disrupts reflective tasks which require working memory – **choking**

- Why yipping and choking do not threaten reflection-based accounts:
 - Yipping is *consistent* with anti-intellectualism, but need not support it.
 - Choking on the other hand *supports* the attention control account.
 - Similar to **slips**: intentional behavior, subject to automatic control, but the basic action dissolves because attention is not appropriately structured towards the overarching goal
 - Requires **diachronic attention**: sustaining an intention

⇒ In both cases, the failure is of attention – inappropriate “breadth” of the focus

- ◆ **Expertise-induced amnesia**

1. If a process is *accessible* for working memory, it can be reported.
2. Experts cannot report what they did or how they did it.
Hence,
3. Expert performance is *independent* from working memory – so it is probably automatic/non-reflective.

- Why expertise-induced amnesia does not threaten reflection-based accounts:

- Intellectualists can resort to demonstrative content: “I did it like this”

Problem with this reply: It generates an undesirable asymmetry between experts’ description of their general knowledge, and description of their own performance.

⇒ However, evidence is inconclusive: it’s about **highly skilled agents**, not really about **experts**

⇒ Also this evidence conflicts with experts retrospective reports, mentioning **effortful focus**

◆ **Expert confabulation**

Experts report that they are doing something when they perform, but in fact they are doing something else.

- Why expert confabulation does not threaten reflection-based accounts:
 - Skilled agents vs experts again: “True experts” are indeed aware of what they are doing
- ⇒ Experts structure their attention differently

- Articulating the Attention Control Account:

Attention Control Account 2.0

- (i) Performing a skilled action requires that your attention is structured by a higher-order, performance-related, *sustained* intention.
- (ii) If your attention is structured by a higher-order, performance-related intention, then you are reflecting.

Q1: Does (i) have an explanatory advantage over past training, automated routines and the normativity of automaticity?

Q2: Is (ii) an adequate sufficient condition of reflection?

Continuous reflection in skilled (non-expert) action

- Requires discrimination of **solicitations** from mere affordances: priming the former, and inhibiting the latter

⇒ A **priority map** for affordances

- This is a form of **control**, which involves “keeping in mind” a **representation of a goal**.

Habitual (mindless) action

- **Intentional:** A sensorimotor response to felt tensions that must be resolved (**normativity of automaticity**)
- **Skillful:** Subtle ways of interacting with the environment, acquired through practice
- **Intention-independent:** No recruitment of automatic control by a reflective process

⇒ Irreflective automatic skills: Some are actions, some are not.

◆ **Utilization behavior**

- Insensitive to the relevance of comparative affordances – so, an intentional behavior rather than an action

◆ **Everyday coping**

- Independent of **calculation or deliberation**, or manipulation of propositions
- But not independent of control – so, an intentional action

◆ **Distraction:** Capture of attention by goal-irrelevant affordances, leading to exogenously generated behavior – may or may not disrupt goal-structured behavior

Q3: Bermudez proposes that utilization behavior patients are an extreme case of distraction (less extreme cases include ordinary mind wandering). Is this a suitable conceptualization?