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Review of Simon Høffding, *A Phenomenology of Musical Absorption*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2019

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In the philosophy of art and aesthetics, the artist's and performer's experience has traditionally been considered irrelevant for understanding art. Yet, there is a growing field of research focusing precisely on such experience, in particular within cognitive science, neuroscience, and among interdisciplinarily minded philosophers interested in issues of embodiment and expertise, some of whom have also argued that this research can be conducive to the philosophy of art. A new contribution to this field is Simon Høffding's book *A Phenomenology of Musical Absorption*, based on a qualitative study of the world-famous ensemble The Danish String Quartet, supplemented with interviews with and autobiographic material from some other musicians.

The goal of the work is said to be twofold: first, the author wants to answer a particular question that arises when confronted with expert musicians' descriptions of their experiences: "Who is playing?" (p. 2). While deeply concentrated during rehearsal or performance, many musicians (and other performers) have described the feeling of something else taking over: the body, the fingers, the instrument, the music. What kind of self is present in this experience and what kind of consciousness does the musician have of her own performance and of the musical work that is performed? Second, Høffding presents a phenomenological account of the experiences at issue, that is based on thorough empirical work – he has followed the DSQ for several years – and analysed with tools from phenomenology and cognitive science. While not mainly concerned with philosophical aesthetics, the musical work itself has an important role to play in answering these two questions.

The precise topic of Høffding's study is what he calls "musical absorption", a term that is used in a wider sense than what might be expected: it covers "almost any experience of playing an instrument undergone by an experienced musician, to refer to that person's engagement with playing music" (4). This term will, however, reveal a more fine-grained topography in Høffding's investigation and its analysis serve as point of departure for criticism of a number of other accounts of the mind in skilful action, in particular that of Hubert Dreyfus and of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. But also more recent attempts to understand expertise are subject to scrutiny.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I, "Meeting the Danish String Quartet", consists in a methodological discussion emphasising the importance of qualitative empirical work and in particular interviews, followed by a synthesis of the material generated through Høffding's field work and a preliminary account of the various forms of musical absorption. Part II is called "Comparative Perspectives" and relates Høffding's results to earlier theories of expertise and of experience in skilled performance. In Part III, the author deepens his analysis of musical

absorption, drawing on Husserl's analyses of passive syntheses, Shaun Gallagher's theory of the body-schema, Merleau-Ponty's concept of intercorporeity among others.

The phenomenological interview (PI) then, stands apart from classical phenomenology in employing a second person, rather than first person, perspective. It differs from interview methods typically conducted within the social sciences in that the theoretical framework is phenomenological, and thus aims to uncover invariant structures of experience such as “the minimal self, the embodiment of consciousness, and a sense of agency” (19). The PI is composed of two tiers, first the generation of descriptions of the experiences through interviews, and second the analysis of these experiences by means of phenomenological tools.

Høffding then proceeds to the material generated by the interviews, discussing one musician of the DSQ at a time: violinist Frederik Øland, violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, violist Asbjørn Nørgaard, and cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin. Summaries of and quotes from the interviews are presented, together with a preliminary interpretation. This leads to the topography outlined in Chapter 4, including five kinds of musical absorption: *standard absorption*, *mind wandering not-being-there*, *frustrated playing*, *absorbed not-being-there* and *ex-static absorption*. Høffding maintains that these categories are “bottom-up”, that is, formulated on the basis of the interview material rather than imposed upon it, and not entirely distinct but susceptible of “bleed[ing] into” one another (75). The topography is not claimed to be exhaustive but designed to give a more structured picture of the phenomenology in question, which is useful when extant theories of expertise are discussed later on.

The most common experience of the musicians during performance – and often during rehearsal and practice as well – is *standard absorption*. It involves, Høffding argues, a “match between expectation and execution” (75), a smoothness in performance that gives room for reflection, imagination, and perception of what is going on in the room. *Mind wandering not-being-there*, by contrast, happens occasionally: the musician becomes absentminded, thinks about completely unrelated things (like going to the supermarket) while playing as it were on autopilot. The third form of absorption, *frustrated playing*, is also much less common among the experiences described, and involves some kind of obstacle to the performance: accidents, pains or perhaps an inattentive audience. It corresponds, Høffding states, to “a mismatch between expectation and execution preventing the freedom experienced in standard absorption from unfolding” (79). Rather than a genuine form of absorption, it is a break in the engagement with the music.

More interesting are the fourth and fifth forms of absorption. *The absorbed not-being-there* is quite rare and difficult to describe, precisely because it is characterised by an absence of normal perception and even, Høffding claims, by amnesia. Fredrik speaks of a form of “blackout” (66) where, in Høffding's analysis, the “subject–object structuring intentionality seems to be changed or blurred” (81). At the same time and paradoxically it is a very powerful experience, a very strong form of being-there. The last form, *ex-static absorption*, is in certain ways similar to the former; it has, Høffding writes, “the same experiential base” (85), but the viewpoint is different: it has a disinterested, distant quality, looking at the performance as from above, and is experienced by the musicians “to some degree in almost every concert” (87).

In Part II, Høffding discusses other research perspectives on related issues, in particular the expertise debate, originating with Dreyfus's account of expertise as mindless coping. He also examines the psychology of mind-wandering, the phenomenology of the body in dance, Mikel Dufrenne's notion of “adherent reflection”, the notion of flow, studies of sleeping and dreaming and even of schizophrenia. Discussing these various theoretical accounts will presumably further the understanding of musical absorption.

Høffding's preliminary assumption, he writes, was that the experiences of intense musical absorption would confirm Dreyfus's theory (39), according to which (at least in its mature version) skilled action is both nonconceptual and mindless. No thinking goes on in such “embodied coping” (Dreyfus 2005, 47) and there is no place even for intentional content, at least when the coping is “fully absorbed” (Dreyfus 2013, 28) (quoted in Høffding, 97). As field work

continued, however, Høffding reconsidered his position, and is presently strongly critical of Dreyfus. He argues that Dreyfus's framework makes skilled action and expertise inaccessible to phenomenological description, since there seems to be no experience to describe on this account. But since there is extant research showing that experts actually do reflect on their actions, a theory of expertise must be able to account for that. Høffding is also concerned that no contrast is made in this theory between ordinary coping and expert coping, so that no distinctions can be drawn between different levels or kinds of absorption (98–99). Further, Dreyfus's position entails a dualism between the reflective mind and the coping body that undermines an adequate account of expertise.

Among the empirically inspired studies serving as evidence against Dreyfus is of course Høffding's own. Although one of the absorption forms, *absorbed not-being-there*, may correspond to Dreyfus' mindless coping, this is only one of its versions and moreover the rarest. The many descriptions of the musicians' absorbed experiences show that experts often reflect and cope at the same time.

Two other scholars who have similarly challenged Dreyfus' account, John Sutton and Barbara Montero, are discussed: Sutton's (and colleagues') "mesh" approach – maintaining that coping normally goes on somewhere in the space between reflexes and pure thought – and Montero's cognition-in-action principle. With the latter principle, Montero questions the "very notion of coping ... as a mythical construction" (105). Høffding is basically in agreement with these ideas, but believes that the emphasis on reflection is too strong – in particular Montero's theory leaves no room for certain aspects of absorption, notably *absorbed not-being-there*.

In Chapter 6, artistic and aesthetic experience is examined in relation to research on dancers. In particular Dorothee Legrand and Susanne Ravn have studied dancers' experiential relation to their bodies, and the manner that one's own body can appear to perception as a form of subjectivity. They analyse bodily awareness as various levels of reflection and pre-reflection, and Høffding, while sympathetic to their work, is critical of their reliance on the traditional notion of reflection; in his view, what he calls "performative awareness" cannot be captured through the distinction reflective–prereflective.

Instead, Høffding introduces Dufrenne's notion of "adherent reflection" in order to account for that form of awareness, as well as for the givenness of the "additional intentional object" that music constitutes (122). In adherent reflection, I do not stand at a distance from the object-work of art but "submit myself to the work" (Dufrenne 1973, quoted in Høffding, 128) which gains a subjectivity of its own. This notion will serve to elucidate the DSQ musicians' descriptions of a particular openness to the musical work they perform.

In Part III, Høffding proceeds to a more positive and in-depth account of the phenomenology of absorption, with the altered sense of self as a guide-line. He sees it manifested as an alteration in the *sense of agency*, related to a "powerful change in the deepest levels of subjectivity" (175). In contrast with other scholars in the field, that are allegedly focused on certain binary terms – mindfulness–coping, reflective–prereflective, thought–action – and summed up by Høffding as "the *question of reflection*" (177, emphasis in text), that "overly reduces the phenomenon and fails to account for essential elements of absorption" (5), the author believes that the framework of "performative passivity" can give a more thorough account of the experience of absorption. For this reason, Høffding draws on Husserl's analyses of the passive synthesis and Merleau-Ponty's notion of intercorporeity, but also on contemporary phenomenologists such as Gallagher and Dan Zahavi.

The aim of the notion of performative passivity is to capture the altered sense of agency that the interviewed musicians sometimes describe: the experience of the music taking over, that "something other than me [causes] the music to unfold the way it unfolds (188). In this experience, the musicians are still active, but not at the level of the ego, and a notion of passivity that is continuous with activity is better apt to do their experiences justice. In order to flesh out the notion of performative passivity and its conditions, Høffding considers several theories of

joint activity and attention that could provide a theoretical framework for the “hive mind” Asbjørn referred to when endeavouring to characterise his experience of playing together. The upshot is that a necessary condition of performative passivity is a “highly specialized body schema” (249) acquired through extensive practice – and in “hive mind” cases like this, (partly) joined with the other musicians’ body schemas – where affectivity and the unique structure of music play an important role (249).

To sum up, Høffding has shown with wonderful clarity the value of listening to and analysing performers’ depiction of their experience, not only in order to provide a theoretical framework that can account for the particular experiences associated with expertise but also to prompt philosophical understanding of artistic/aesthetic experience, art and creativity. Obtaining such richness in descriptions is of course to a substantial degree due to the verbal skills of the musicians themselves, but also importantly to the interviewer’s profound familiarity with the interviewees and personal knowledge of the art form in question: I believe that Høffding’s own experience as an amateur musician and former choir-singer plays a significant role in the development of questions and themes.

But here lies also an internal conflict within Høffding’s account. In the Introduction, he maintains that his criteria of general absorption can be met by the engagement with playing music on any level. This implies that the expert’s experience and that of the amateur are not categorially distinct. A continuity between the different forms is also confirmed both by the topographic description and by the results of the study as a whole, where, as mentioned, the role of the interviewer’s own musical experience is both referred to explicitly and manifest in the dialogue with the interviewees. Nevertheless, “the more intense form [of absorption] is reserved for experts” (4), and it is not clear what argument Høffding gives for this differentiation. In his criticism of Dreyfus, the author seems to rely upon a contrast between nonexpert and expert, accusing Dreyfus of “haphazard” philosophising in generalising from a nonexpert to an expert (93), without acknowledging that all of us are experts in a wide range of skills. While I agree with Høffding that finer distinctions should be made between various forms of skills, and that (skilful) locking of a door and the coping exemplified in a professional musician’s playing an instrument do not share the exact same set of characteristics, no reason is given why ordinary skills or even amateur experience of music playing, dancing or whatever could not contribute to the understanding of expertise.

In spite of the fluid topography of absorption, there is in other words in Høffding’s book a tendency to treat experts as a category *sui generis*, being able to experience “intense absorption” (*absorbed not-being-there* and *ex-static absorption*), while this capacity is denied young children and in general “novices” (215). Yet no argument for this distinction is given except “the thousands of hours of practice” (215). But how and at what point does such a capacity arise, and when does the notion of performative passivity suddenly become applicable? What is the reason for denying children who behave as if they are intensely absorbed – entirely focused on their movements, not reacting to what is going on around them or hearing when they are being called upon – the capacity to have such experiences? In particular since we thereby limit the power of the theory to explain how intensely absorbed experiences can arise in the first place.

Another problem is Høffding’s desire to construct a theory that is independent – “paradigmatic” even (30) – in relation to other researchers. This leads to a lack of generosity vis-à-vis precursors and other scholars, and to methodological demands on others that are not met by Høffding’s own work. Dreyfus’s well-known idea that rules in skill acquisition are like training wheels that we can remove once we have become skilled, and that expertise can be described as an engaged and situation-specific way of coping, is rejected – in spite of being “universally applicable”! (93) – on the grounds that it gives rise to “dualism” (95). Not all distinctions are dualistic, however, and although there may be other grounds to criticise Dreyfus’s theory of expertise this one is mainly backed up by a misleading quote. For Dreyfus, supposedly, “ultimately the primary awareness must be either coping or rule-following, which are ‘opposed,

but ... supplementary' (Dreyfus 2013, 21)" (95). What Dreyfus opposes, however, is not coping versus rule-following, but McDowell's versus existential phenomenology's accounts of the relation between mind and world: "We must therefore distinguish two opposed, but hopefully supplementary, accounts of our relation to reality" (Dreyfus 2013, 21).

Another example is the notion of "flow", coined by Csikszentmihalyi in the 70s, on the basis of interviews with artists and developed through extensive research for several decades. On Csikszentmihalyi's view, flow is an experience of full concentration that is "deeply involving and enjoyable" (Csikszentmihalyi 2014, 24) and characterised by a loss of self-consciousness (but not of the I). It occurs when there is a fit between the skills of the person and the challenges that the environment affords her and can be found in a vast range of situations: playing tennis, violin or on the stock exchange, reading novels or writing poetry as well as in social interactions, and on every level of development. This is also one of the problems with this notion, according to Høffding, that it is "too general and theoretically underspecified" (135), for that reason of "little scientific value" and in certain regards "incompatible with the phenomenology of musical absorption" (136).

The complaint that the notion is too general links up with my remark above about Høffding's tendency to treat musical absorption as a singular phenomenon, while "reading a good book" – a situation where flow can be experienced according to Csikszentmihalyi – is said to be a "very ordinary kind of experience" (136) and thus not qualifying for the total involvement that Høffding (as well as the Hungarian psychologist) is interested in. And yet, Asbjørn described precisely an experience of reading as being "in the zone" (63) – a case of intense absorption according to Høffding's topography. Many of the expressions the musicians use to describe their absorbed experiences coincide with those of Csikszentmihalyi: being "in the zone" for one (Csikszentmihalyi 2014, 24), and the musicians repeatedly come back to the image of music or "things" "flowing" (63, 65), of "flowing along" (63), etc. (cf. 69, 70, 71), that this term would seem a more adequate label! Further, Csikszentmihalyi does indeed allow for different levels of flow, in particular for an "ecstatic" condition (Csikszentmihalyi 2014, 134 f.) that calls Høffding's ex-static absorption to mind. Similarly, one of the conditions of flow that Csikszentmihalyi points to, the fit between skills and challenges, recalls Høffding's "perceived match between expectation and execution" (75) as a condition of standard absorption.

This is of course not to say that Høffding should swallow Csikszentmihalyi's or others' theories hook, line and sinker but simply that his work would have benefitted from making more charitable interpretations and drawing on the elements that seemed adequate. For example, Høffding rejects the idea of a fit between skills and challenges as incompatible with certain statements of the musicians, notably Asbjørn's proposal that playing ten traditional Danish chorals is a perfect condition for intense absorption. Here, Høffding writes, "Asbjørn is exactly not challenged what so ever. [...] He is just enjoying playing something simple." (141) However, this is not quite what the violist said, and more interestingly, I believe this is one of many cases where Høffding had the means to elaborate upon certain ideas to enhance and clarify his own theory. Asbjørn enjoys playing the chorals because they are easy and because "it is something we have grown up with. It is our musical language. ... all pressure is off. The audience is wide open ..." (140–141). Indeed, the challenge here is not technical, but as Høffding importantly points out later on, the expertise of a classical musician does not simply consist in playing a series of notes registered on a score sheet, but "each note is subject to subtle interpretation and improvisation" (226). In this case, the notion of challenge at play could have been elaborated, in order to account for the unique structure of the music that – since "we have grown up with" it – evokes a particularly strong emotional engagement; thus mending and enriching – rather than jettisoning – parts of Csikszentmihalyi's story.

Further, Csikszentmihalyi certainly does not give a definition of flow in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, as Høffding complains (138), but neither does Høffding of absorption, and all the better! Just as in the case of flow, absorption is hardly a closed-off

experience and the topography given rightly presents it as an open configuration where its different forms are in a certain continuity and overlap.

In a similar way, Høffding could have drawn on Montero's (whose work he refers to) suggestion that expertise is distinguished through the aim at constantly improving even after many years of practice (Montero 2013, 314; 2016, 64), in order to account for the kind of expertise he is interested in, or on the various efforts to analyse levels of reflection and self-awareness by Legrand, Ravn, Colombetti and many others rather than reduce their accounts to a "question of reflection" (5, 177 f.) that should be set aside in favour of "a different framework", performative passivity (178). Although I believe that Høffding is right to emphasise the rich phenomenological analyses of passivity, he does not succeed in making a case for the idea that "performative passivity" can stand on its own as a framework for understanding the experiences of expert performers.

There are in general many loose ends in the book that are not tied up: For example, what is the relation between performative awareness, performative passivity and adherent reflection, and how does the latter notion relate to "the question of reflection", allegedly too reductive for understanding musical absorption? How and why does intense absorption depend on expertise (and of what kind) and on the musical structure, and what is it about music that can afford this experience? What happened to the intriguing notion of "absorption générateur [*sic!*]" that appears at a rather pivotal stage in the argument, supposedly to account for the self-transformation found in (intense) absorption? Minkowski's *trouble générateur* designated a fundamental disorder that could be seen as generative of symptoms, but in what sense is absorption generative? Does it generate self-transformation, but how? And what does it mean to say that performative passivity itself is a generative absorption (189)? That being said, Høffding has uncovered a thought-provoking path that I hope will be continued.

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