

# A HISTORY OF HABIT



FROM ARISTOTLE TO BOURDIEU

*EDITED BY TOM SPARROW AND ADAM HUTCHINSON*



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Edited by Tom Sparrow and Adam Hutchinson

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For George Yancy, both the Monongahela  
and Allegheny to our little Ohio.

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Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning-conductor of his existence.

—Beckett, Proust

Plato scolded a child who was playing at cobnuts. He answered him: "You scold me for a small matter." "Habit," replied Plato, "is no small matter."

—Montaigne, Essays

# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

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Tom Sparrow and Adam Hutchinson

Reflections on the Unreflected

## 1. ABOUT THE PHILOSOPHY OF HABIT AND THIS BOOK

René Descartes believed common sense to be the most equitably distributed thing in the world. The essays collected here contest Descartes' assessment by affirming that habit enjoys a more generous distribution, for it is detectable not only in the minds of humans, but also in the behavior of non-human animals, the dynamics of populations, the growth patterns of plants, and the tendencies of systems. Under the influence of C. S. Peirce and Charles Darwin, William James went even one step further when he claimed that the laws of nature are nothing more than habits.<sup>[1]</sup> Even if this sort of brash speculation cannot in the end be substantiated with empirical evidence, it is at least the case that habit is universally acknowledged as basic to human thought and action. Quite often the detection of habit in human behavior is also charged with a moral valuation, as when we chastise someone for their bad habits or praise them for cultivating healthy ones. Occasionally habit calls attention to its existential valence, as when in *Waiting for Godot* one of Samuel Beckett's most well-known characters soberly proclaims that "habit is a great deadener."<sup>[2]</sup> The metaphysical weight of this pronouncement is as palpable as Vladimir's ambivalent tone. The reach of habit, however, cannot be confined to the behavioral, moral, or existential spheres. It admits of biological, sociological, psychological, neurological, epistemological, phenomenological, and ontological dimensions among many others.

When you peek beyond the popular discourse familiar to everyone what you find is a rich philosophical discussion of the role that habit plays in our personal, political, spiritual, and intellectual lives. Countless questions arise in the history of habit. Is it simply a psychological phenomenon, easily manipulated by positive and negative reinforcement? Are customs and passions different in kind or degree? Are personality and character habitual? How do habits help or hinder our attempts to solve problems? Does habit function at the transcendental or empirical level (or both)? Do inanimate objects possess habits, or can only sentient creatures act habitually? What about plants? Do habits constitute our first or second nature? Can we exist without habits? Can we be sure that the laws of nature are more (or less) than physical habits? What is the metaphysics of habit? If only one thing is agreed upon between anyone who has offered a reflection on these questions, it is that habit solicits contradictory evaluations. It remains an elusive concept, but one with great explanatory power. This, as much as its enduring significance and ambivalent interpretation, provoked us to assemble a text that would exhibit the plurality of ways that habit has been used to explain, understand, and regulate the

world.

The idea for this book grew out of a series of informal discussions on the history of philosophy which took place—habitually, it should be noted—at Hanlon Café in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, not far from the campus of Duquesne University. It owes just as much to our respective research into theories of embodiment and, especially, a common interest in the naturalistic philosophy of the pragmatists, for whom habit is a basic mechanism of human nature. Adding to this a mutual affection for David Hume and a long-standing familiarity with the account of virtuous individuals outlined in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we began to regard habit as one of the most recurrent and useful concepts at work in the history of Western philosophy. We suspect that many readers will see this as a truism, which is why we were surprised to find a text on the history of habit unavailable. We have therefore sought to assemble one that would make explicit the largely unheralded yet readily acknowledged, role that habit plays in the history of philosophy, while at the same time demonstrating its privileged importance for many prominent thinkers, for example, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Hume, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Pierre Bourdieu, and entire schools of thought, such as Roman Stoicism and American pragmatism. Most of the chapters focus on how a particular thinker engages the concept of habit in his or her work. Some of them dig deeply into the question of what constitutes a habit—the metaphysics of habit, as it were—while others, instead of asking what a habit is, examine how the concept can be applied—to ethical practice, social problems, or intellectual endeavor—to better understand and change the order of things. As editors we asked each contributor to explore either or both of these dimensions, and to do so with a view toward demonstrating the historicity of their figure's mobilization of habit. This is achieved to a greater or lesser degree, contingent upon the contributor's discipline, tradition, and methodological approach. The variability resulting from this pluralism, rather than constituting a weakness, is one of the collection's chief virtues. It reflects the pluralistic history of habit itself and is why we committed ourselves as editors to soliciting, as well as preserving, the multiple sensibilities of our contributors.

Taken as a whole the book aims to show how and in what sense philosophers and other thinkers of habit are engaged in a broad, multifaceted dialogue concerning the nature and meaning of habit, its function in human affairs, and its appropriation by speculative thought—a dialogue that is perhaps only today garnering critical recognition. Toward this end, *A History of Habit: From Aristotle to Bourdieu* offers a heterogeneous history of the philosophy of habit through a series of critical interventions which continue to push the dialogue forward. At the same time, these essays attempt to provoke a dialogue between philosophy and other disciplines. Like many of our contributors we contend that the many discourses of habit found in philosophical texts have vast import for a panoply of other fields as well.

So, it was not the indiscriminate or quotidian use of the concept of habit—which take habit's meaning and applicability for granted—that generated the idea for this book. It was our common recognition that the discourses of philosophy,

psychology, and sociology (just to name a few) are littered with offhand reference to, and technical engagements with, the fundamentality of habit. Assertions of its efficacy as well as strong ascriptions of its role in the formation of subject identities, social relationships, and ways of comporting oneself or representing one's world are distributed across disparate fields of study. Habit is identified as the basis of knowledge, perception, and aesthetic pleasure. Casual references abound, and more often than not these occur at crucial moments in an author's argument or analysis. It is a ready-made concept that is difficult to resist when another is lacking. Hume famously reduces causality to customary association, that is, habit, when he cannot locate the necessary connection between cause and effect, and yet needs to account for their universal association. Aristotle and James appeal to habit when they need to explain the persistence of actions that are sometimes active, sometimes dormant. More recently one influential film theorist has argued that the masculinist gaze, which is built into so many films, conditions women to see like men. How does this happen? This conditioning, she concludes, "a habit that very easily becomes second nature."<sup>[3]</sup> The explanatory power of habit is immense. And yet, with some exceptions its ontological constitution is rarely investigated, or it is overshadowed by its physical description.<sup>[4]</sup>

Habit complicates our understanding of what it means to act. This is perhaps what makes it so fascinating and why it continues to serve as a useful conceptual, as well as rhetorical, device for explaining behavior. It is a liminal concept, occupying a space at the border between several of the binaries that organize the philosophical discourse of action. In this respect it tends to mingle oppositional concepts like freedom/determination, natural/artificial, active/passive, cause/effect, spontaneity/instinct, and agent/patient. In one way or another each of our contributors renders salient this aspect of habit. Or, more precisely, they make it clearer insofar as they color the edges of a liminal space, occupied by habit, that resists our usual conceptual framework. As such, habit marks a certain indecision about the cause of action; this indecision repeats throughout the history of philosophy, and suggests that habit is not merely a cog in the determinist's machine. The dual nature of habit, therefore, makes trouble for our ideas of moral choice, autonomy, culpability, and so forth. Félix Ravaisson referred to this as the "double law of habit," a phrase which indicates habit's repetitive and generative aspects and, once again, confirms its paradoxical status as an explanatory concept.<sup>[5]</sup> This is, perhaps, the reason for its enduring relevance and manifold interpretation.

But habit is not just a concept that makes trouble and steers us into paradox. It is true that these critical attributes make for intellectual intrigue and are important insofar as they disturb familiar ways of thinking. More than that, what we see emerging in the history of habit—with notable intensity in the French context—is a viable alternative to the Cartesian picture of subjectivity much maligned in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If Cartesianism trades in a dualist metaphysics that regards mind and body, spirit and matter as distinct substances, and then assumes this basic dualism in its accounts of thought, passion, behavior, and action, then by contrast the philosophy of habit encourages us to conceive these

phenomena as occurring between mind and body, spirit and matter. Habit becomes indispensable for constructing a nondualist metaphysics along with new accounts of subjectivity. Proponents of the ongoing critique of Cartesian subjectivity will no doubt find resources in this book.

Our collection is designed to be read in a couple ways. Reading the text cover-to-cover provides a narrative of habit's history in the Western philosophical tradition and a window onto its application in contemporary social theory. It is not necessary, however, to read each chapter in succession. Although each chapter makes reference to figures and ideas elaborated at length in other chapters, each stands alone and encourages readers to dip selectively into the collection. Some chapters are more general than others; they lay the groundwork for the discussion. Many chapters make critical interventions into the discussion, focusing on specific conceptual, historical, and/or social issues.

Every historical narrative includes gaps in the story, interpretive distortion, and unforgivable omissions. Every text suffers the constraints imposed upon it by time, space, and word counts. Ours is no exception. Although a generous selection of figures is covered, with a project of this scope—and given the interpretive apparatus outlined above—a number of thinkers who deserve more attention could not receive exclusive treatment. The necessity of these omissions, we contend, only demonstrates the ubiquity of habit in the history of ideas. To be sure, many of the excluded are operating at the margins of the included or are discussed explicitly, if only for comparison or contrast. Several (likely more) glaring omissions warrant some justification.

First, the nineteenth-century British Utilitarians arguably deserve inclusion in any collection exploring the history and future of habit in philosophy. Both Jeremy Bentham and J. S. Mill (not to speak of Henry Sidgwick) argued that much of what we consider either good or bad—pleasurable and painful—is a matter of historically established habit; that the best of laws are themselves attempts to habituate behaviors that previous generations found to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Bentham was especially active in calling attention to how many seemingly “static” social and gendered notions of his day were just the accumulation of historical habit: we ignore the obvious suffering of animals not because it is somehow “natural” for us, but because the habit of thinking of them as non-rational mechanisms has been so firmly ingrained in our thought. As Richard Rorty later pointed out, Mill was especially influential among early American jurists and philosophers of a certain pragmatic bent; he is in large part responsible for the attention that such thinkers pay to habit as a social force. It would certainly be a little too much to say that Dewey's and James's robust developments of the concept of habit are a direct result of their reading of utilitarian philosophy, but it would also be wrong to dismiss such an obvious historical influence.

Our next painful omission also represents a powerful influence upon American pragmatism and the social psychology of George Herbert Mead, among more recent philosophical views of habit. We have not included any essays that focus exclusively on the major German idealists. This omission does not imply that

German Idealism has nothing of worth to say about habit. Indeed, at the very least Immanuel Kant, J. G. Fichte, and G. W. F. Hegel all make interesting contributions to the development of habit, not to mention F. W. J. Schelling, who may have had direct influence on Ravaisson's thinking.<sup>[6]</sup> The influence of German idealism is probably most easily seen cashing out in Karl Marx's theory of ideology and Dewey's later rendering of the social as a habituated organic unity. This is not to say, of course, that German idealism's contribution to the philosophy of habit can only be gleaned from those who were influenced by the movement. Implicit in Hegel's famous philosophy of history, for instance, is the idea that habit has some sort of greater metaphysical or ontological basis within spirit and is not something fully explicable within the mechanistic framework favored by so many in his day. By the same token, Kant's ethics seems to stand as a great critique of the role of habit within moral thought. In his *Critique of Practical Reason* and associated works, Kant argues that the distance of the moral law from something like habit is precisely what distinguishes the ethical from other forms of thought. After all, in order to act ethically I must appeal only to a law that I give myself, which finds its origin in reason alone and never in my desires or normative social rules. That is to say, an appeal to habit—whether in the form of automatic action or the historical fossilization of experience in common law—is always foreign to the true ethical standpoint that is found in reason alone.

Friedrich Nietzsche memorably advocated for the efficacy of what he called "brief habits." In *The Gay Science* he draws a memorable contrast between habits that stick around for a lifetime and habits that linger for a short while, then flee the scene. His ambivalence toward habit is not aimed at habit as such; he instead prepares a critique of habit on the basis of its temporality and purpose. Brief habits are seen as healthy, for they allow knowledge to expand and deepen through diverse experiences. Enduring habits, by contrast, are a hindrance to self-overcoming. "Enduring habits I hate," he writes. "I feel as if a tyrant had come near me and as if the air I breathe had thickened when events take such a turn that it appears that they will inevitably give rise to enduring habits."<sup>[7]</sup> A more thorough exploration of Nietzsche's writing on habit and its relation to the theme of health is certainly called for.

A full treatment of Martin Heidegger's pragmatism and hermeneutics is missing here.<sup>[8]</sup> Although he does not frame his analysis in terms of habit, early Heidegger (and Merleau-Ponty after him) understands *Dasein's* worldhood as principally a matter of habitual tool use. In its everyday mode *Dasein* (Heidegger's stand-in for the human being) is a being entangled in equipment and working to achieve a set of tasks which are enabled by a sedimented historical and practical knowledge. It is on the basis of this knowledge that *Dasein* navigates its historical situation, and it is from this perspective that *Dasein* establishes an interpretive framework upon which to understand and operate in the world. Insofar as Heidegger is a thinker of historical rootedness and practical knowledge, or, put otherwise, a thinker of *habitus* and *habitat*, his philosophy of habit demands further treatment—especially given the shadow it casts over the entirety of twentieth-century continental philosophy.

John Locke's 1693 educational treatise, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* no doubt deserves a place in the history of habit. An influence on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*, Locke's text treats explicitly the habits to be inculcated in students. The case is easily made that the function of habit in Michel Foucault's analyses of disciplinary societies and biopolitics deserves sustained study as well. There is no doubt, given that he writes: "the soldier has become something that can be made; out of formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit."<sup>[9]</sup> Finally, it is more than apparent that a keystone in the history of habit is the translation of the Greek *hexis* into the Latin *habitus*. A proper linguistic study of this important transition is absent from our collection, and bridging this gap would require a close inspection of the work of Quintilian and Cicero, among others.

Despite these lacunae—born of necessity rather than neglect—readers will find in these pages a representative tour of the philosophy of habit. While it is inevitable that some reviewers will find our omissions scandalous (such is the fate of endeavors such as this), we are confident that the rough texture of philosophical thinking about habit has not been smoothed out. In other words, we hope to help generate a more historically informed discussion of habit, not provide a definitive history of it as a subject.

## 2. THE CHAPTERS

The book is divided into three historical periods. Part I showcases some classical thinking on the role that habit plays in the determination of character. A concern with the cultivation and maintenance of ethical integrity (taken in the structural sense) is the real thread that runs through this set of essays. The opening chapter by Thornton Lockwood lays the groundwork for each of the chapters that follow it by providing a close textual analysis of the concept of *hexis* in Aristotle, who forms a central reference point for virtually every philosophy of habit that comes after him. In an attempt to contest the view that what Aristotle bequeaths to us is a non-philosophical, mechanistic view of character formation Lockwood explores the Greek vocabulary of habit which attends Aristotle's thinking of ethical character. Lockwood works to dissociate the repetitive interpretation of habituation from Aristotle's less mechanistic understanding of ethical character. He argues that Aristotle's notion of ethical excellence is best formulated in terms of *hexis*, rather than *techne* or *ethos*, precisely because the former bears a moral connotation lacking in the latter. The ethically virtuous person is not defined by the skills she possesses, but by the habits she embodies and, with a certain virtuosity, summons in the appropriate circumstances.

In chapter 2, William O. Stephens turns his attention to the teaching of the Roman Stoics Seneca, Musonius Rufus, and Epictetus, whose ethics prescribe a way of life organized by the rigorous rejection and cultivation of habits of thought, action, and emotion. The advantageously organized life only results from careful



attention to the metaphysics of human action, and consistently sound judgments about the good, the bad, and the indifferent. Consistency of judgment leads to consistent—that is, habitual—actions, which ultimately pave the way to happiness. Not unlike Aristotle, who understood virtue and, consequently, happiness to be a product of long-established habit, the Stoics regard happiness as something achievable for most people only after a lifetime of training (*askēsis*). In addition to outlining the accounts of habit provided by three major figures in the history of Roman Stoicism, Stephens surveys the diverse habits to be shunned or adopted by the Stoic who aspires to live a life of virtue, that is, to live a life in accordance with nature and reason.

Robert Miner's essay on Aquinas (chapter 3) explores the supposed contradiction between habituation and freedom of the will, a topic that arises again and again in the essays that follow. Miner demonstrates how, for Aquinas, *habitus* actually conditions "freedom in its most desirable form." He provides readers with a non-technical presentation of the Scholastic's analysis, proceeding in four steps which clearly articulate the principle, subject, cause, and distinction of habit as Aquinas understands it. He helpfully contrasts habit and its cognate, disposition, and concludes by comparing Aquinas with Nietzsche's remarks on habit in *The Gay Science* §295 (referenced above) in order to evince the compatibility of habit and freedom, as conceived by both philosophers.

Margaret Watkins (chapter 4) closes Part I with a close look at the *Essays* of Montaigne, a figure who synthesizes ancient and medieval thinking on habit in a subtle ideal of personal integrity. Watkins picks up on Montaigne's suspicion of habit as an artificial and settled custom, a "second nature," before going on to adduce Montaigne's ambivalent reflections on the reliability of character. She argues that what Montaigne calls "custom" bears a complex relation to the late-medieval (Aristotelian) understanding of "habit," one that raises certain paradoxes of freedom and necessity. Montaigne does not settle with a paradox, however, but prescribes a paramodern form of self-stylization that strives for excellence by balancing the force of habit with the force of reflection freely undertaken. Liberation from custom as second nature, Watkins shows, is perhaps achievable via the self-cultivation of a virtuous character or, alternatively, via an engagement with Montaigne's *Essays* themselves.

Part II considers some of the many ways that habit is taken up in modernity, sometimes for intellectual and sometimes for practical purposes. Toward the end of the modern period the concept of habit is systematically and famously mobilized by the American pragmatists, who find habits at work in every domain of existence. This is not surprising given that their predecessors had already articulated the place of habit in methodology (Descartes), epistemology and moral philosophy (Hume, Adam Smith), educational theory (Locke, Rousseau), as well as metaphysics (Maine de Biran, Ravaisson, and Bergson). Dennis Des Chene (chapter 5) examines the consequences of the replacement of the late-medieval notion of *habitus* with that of "trace" in the early modern period. Specifically, Des Chene is keen to demonstrate that, for Cartesian psychology, in partial contrast to Suárez's habits are material traces of physical encounters mechanistically lodged in the

brain. This is an idea that is taken up centuries later in James's *The Principles of Psychology*, as well as one that continues to influence the neuroscientific theory of habit today. The story of how habits are accumulated in the mind, however, is not straightforward and, suggests Des Chene, contemporary philosophy of mind would do well to heed the account of habit given by Suárez and Descartes after him.

It is Hume who more often than not springs to mind when the word habit is uttered in philosophical circles. The centrality of habit, custom, and history in what might be called Hume's "critical philosophy" is adduced in Peter Fosl's essay (chapter 6). Fosl conceives Hume as a critical philosopher not only in the Kantian sense—as someone concerned with drawing the limits of reason and the conditions of thought and action—but also in the sense of "critical" as it is employed in contemporary aesthetic, textual, and social criticism. In addition to prompting a comparison with Montaigne's account of custom, and drawing important contrasts with Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and others, Fosl engages the secondary literature on Hume to argue that the Scotsman is not best understood by an analogy with the conservative politics of Edmund Burke; instead, Hume should be seen as a political progressive whose position is best articulated through more recent figures like Deleuze, Gadamer, and Mouffe.

In chapter 7 Clare Carlisle gives thorough treatment to Ravaisson's account of habit as it is found in his 1838 essay *Of Habit*. Looking at habit primarily as it pertains to moral practice, she contrasts Ravaisson's view of habit with the Aristotelian and Kantian views. Kant remains hostile to habit in his moral philosophy, but only, argues Carlisle, because he maintains a dualistic perspective on mind and body, freedom and necessity, a perspective that is overcome in Ravaisson's philosophy of habit. In this way Ravaisson anticipates the turn to habit made in the twentieth century by phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricoeur. In addition to cataloguing his debt to Maine de Biran, Carlisle offers an overview of Ravaisson's unique interpretation of habit and what it can teach us about traditional Aristotelian theories of virtue.

David Leary (chapter 8) explores with the eyes of an historian the intellectual path William James traveled as he sought to negotiate a passage between the deterministic understanding of behavior he favored in physiology and the nascent field of psychology, and the voluntarism commanded by his moral sensibility. James's motivation is a familiar one shared by Aristotle, Aquinas, Montaigne, and many others who have sought to reconcile freedom and determinism. Using habit to enact such a compromise may not be an idea original to James. Nevertheless, it is habit, argues Leary, that allows James to mediate between his naturalistic and moral sympathies, first toward psychological, then toward metaphysical, ends. While he echoes some of the same worries about behavior that troubled his predecessors, James is a pivotal figure in the history of habit insofar as he anticipates the intense focus on the brain (neural plasticity in particular) that habit research exhibits today.

Edward Casey's classic essay (chapter 9) builds a bridge between the modern and contemporary periods by juxtaposing Bergson's subtle analysis of memory with the phenomenology of habit adduced by Merleau-Ponty. Casey's essay



challenges many of our usual ideas about the function and place of memory, while also presenting a theory that squarely contrasts with Cartesian/dualistic theories of habit, memory, and action. For Bergson, Casey shows, memory does not reside either in the mind or in the matter of the body. By the same token, and following Bergson, Merleau-Ponty argues that habit need not be located either in the mind or in the body. Habits are embodied and enacted somewhere between body and world. This way of thinking, which is present in the work of pragmatists like Dewey as well, shifts the locus of habit and forces us to rethink habit formation, the ontology of memory, and the dynamics of freedom and necessity.

The chapters of Part III present some of the ways that habit has been applied to the analysis of contemporary society, culture, and thought. They each share a common focus on the materiality, or embodied nature, of our habits and their influence on the relationships we forge. They likewise exhibit the versatility and continuing fertility of the concept of habit for thinking about problems in contemporary social theory. Terrance MacMullan and Shannon Sullivan both work in the tradition of American pragmatism and have recently penned important books that use the concept of habit to interrogate whiteness, racial privilege, and the societal norms that allow racism to function today. MacMullan's offering here (chapter 10) continues this line of thinking by drawing upon resources in the pragmatist tradition to argue that we can alleviate social problems like racism by attending to the habits that unconsciously perpetuate racist attitudes and actions. He first provides a helpful historical review of habit in the work of key pragmatists like Peirce, James, and especially, Dewey. Dewey is critical, according to MacMullan, because he uses habit to both dissolve classical dualisms (mind/world, freedom/determinism) and analyze the persistent social problems that plague democratic communities. He acknowledges that the pragmatists often evade questions about the metaphysics and epistemology of habit, favoring as they do the question of use value. He then makes a case for the continuing meliorist potential of habit—as it is conceived by twentieth-century figures like Jane Addams, W. E. B. DuBois, and Shannon Sullivan—for addressing social issues, including sexism, racism, and homophobia. Partly through a critical engagement with Sullivan's work, MacMullan makes the case that careful attention to habit is indispensable for reconstructing the discriminatory and oppressive habits that persist in the United States.

In her chapter (chapter 11) Sullivan takes up Dewey's transactional model of embodiment with a view to highlighting the neglected biological dimension of, especially, sexist and white racist habits. Instead of evading the ontological question Sullivan investigates the psychosomatic dimension that underlies the constellation of habits that comprise white-racist domination. In critical dialogue with fields as diverse as feminism and gastrointestinal science, she contests the idea that habits admit of only phenomenological or psychoanalytic analyses. On the contrary, these analyses are at their best when appropriated by pragmatism and attentive to the biological basis of habit, to which Dewey's naturalism is already attuned. Sullivan's view acts as a corrective (which is not to say replacement) for the apparent dualism that emerges when someone like Merleau-

Ponty distinguishes between the lived body and objective (i.e., physiological) body in order to outline his own theory of habit. Dewey's philosophy of habit does not land us in biological reductionism, however, but offers a transactional conception of habit that draws upon the hard sciences and lends a hand to feminists and critical philosophers of race trying to build an ethics of social justice.

Jeffrey Bell (chapter 12) offers a reading of Gilles Deleuze that draws together thinkers in the analytic and continental traditions in order to re-conceive what it means to have ideas, conceive things, and create concepts (the task of philosophy), as well as the role that habit plays in thinking. He brings to the fore the influence of Hume on Deleuze in order to show that, as with Hume, Deleuze sees both the association of ideas and the determination of identities as the result of habit or custom. This does not mean, however, that the mind is the origin of the identity of things or ideas. It means instead that ideas and things can only be understood by examining the metaphysics of thought and the "profound life" of things which generates the habits of thinking and action. Bell applies the concept of habit in such a way that includes human and nonhuman activities, and argues that habit, as refracted through the lens of Deleuze's metaphysics, is required to understand the determination of identities and the dynamics of a reality which harbors within it the capacity to break our habits, move us to create new concepts and to "tear us apart."

Habitus is a concept that has become synonymous with the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu; it continues to exert influence in the social sciences. Bourdieu, like many of the figures examined in this volume, works to dismantle the Cartesian picture of agency by drawing our attention to the role of habitual social practices in the constitution of subjectivity. Nick Crossley, a sociologist himself, closes our volume (chapter 13) by demonstrating the significance of Bourdieu's rehabilitation of the classical habitus by contrasting it, on the one hand, with its cognates in Weber, Mauss, and Lévi-Strauss; and on the other, by pinpointing its relationship to philosophers like Aristotle, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein. In a broad exposition of Bourdieu's habitus, analogous to Lockwood's opening essay on Aristotle, Crossley evinces the way in which the philosophy of habit has fertilized research in the social sciences and, conversely, how this research feeds back into contemporary philosophy. He offers a clear and concise introduction to the set of concepts surrounding Bourdieu's habitus, as well as a critical appraisal of Bourdieu's contribution to our understanding of agency.

### 3. THE FUTURE OF HABIT

As we see it the mission of this volume is to chart some of the key moments in the Western philosophical history of habit, and to offer the intrepid reader something of a conceptual cartography of the way habit is utilized to explain everything from routine behavior and morality to the construction of reality itself. We would be remiss, however, if we did not at least offer some indication of where research into the concept of habit is currently heading. While a full exploration of habit's future would require another volume (if not several), a couple of noteworthy directions

ought to be mentioned. These trends are not strictly speaking philosophical, although the way in which habit fits into them will soon require a great deal of philosophical inquiry and clarification. We think they show that philosophical investigation into the concept of habit—like so many burgeoning fields of research—is ongoing and will ultimately call for a thoroughly interdisciplinary inquiry into its meaning and use.

First, we should call attention to the quickly developing and very promising notion within neuroscience of “neuroplasticity.” This term is everywhere, even in television commercials. The philosophical use of the concept of plasticity, which is probably most associated today with the French philosopher and student of Jacques Derrida, Catherine Malabou, can be traced back to the Anglo-American nineteenth century. It is there in Darwin, Peirce, and James.<sup>[10]</sup> It is taken up and carried into the early twentieth century by Dewey. The idea that after a certain age (typically corresponding to the physical maturation of the individual) brains achieve a static form was once a kind of orthodoxy among psychologists, philosophers, and brain scientists. However, research over the last several decades seems to indicate the opposite. The brains of adults, no less than those of children are constantly on the move, responding to the repetitive or habitual behavior of persons and literally restructuring themselves accordingly. That is to say, the neural structures of fully mature brains rearrange themselves in response to repeated actions. Or, as Nicholas Carr puts it: “As the same experience is repeated the synaptic links between the neurons grow stronger and more plentiful through both physiological changes, such as the release of higher concentrations of neurotransmitters, and anatomical ones, such as the generation of new neurons.”<sup>[11]</sup> The behaviors we engage in on a routine basis then create or reinforce certain neural structures within our brains. At the same time behaviors we engage in rarely or sporadically leave few neural traces. In a manner of speaking, then, the neural structure of our brain may be viewed as a collection of fossilized habits, as the crystallized physical remainder of the seemingly unconscious<sup>[12]</sup> behaviors that sustain a large part of our day-to-day lives.

While such a theory is interesting on a number of different levels, it ought to be noted that it also implies that habit is never simply a “mental” activity: every habit has a corresponding physical deposit within the structure of the brain. Even the activity of sustained and solitary engagement with a text—the very habit that the success of this volume is predicated upon—is not a fundamental feature of the human brain, but is just another historically contingent practice that requires constant reinforcement. Like all texts ours is built upon a habit that has roots in the history of Western literary development as well as the neural infrastructure of the brain. Without the various social habits that make solitary reading possible (with the introduction of new information technologies, political toleration of free thought and expression, and the economics of book publication) and the continued reinforcement of such habits in the neural structure of individuals (such as the accepted research methods of contemporary higher education), the habit of reading as we understand it could be very different.

Second, and in conjunction with the concept of neuroplasticity, the ways in

which contemporary information systems present themselves raise several interesting philosophical questions, not the least of which concerns how they shape the behaviors of their users. This is especially apparent if we take into account how the Internet—including the so-called Web 2.0—has fundamentally changed both our habits of thought and communication. As Carr ominously notes, the very practice of solitary reading discussed above is threatened by the habits acquired by habitual Internet use, which offers constant distractions and interruptions (in the form of hyperlinks, pop-ups, tabbed browsing, and so on, and the constant blending of different media) that make sustained engagement with longer texts a much more difficult activity. If the Internet in its current form continues to be the dominant venue for the distribution of information, then the habits it engenders in its users—one of which Carr helpfully calls “skimming”—will fundamentally shape the future of human habits.

As philosopher and futurist Jaron Lanier notes, the very way in which the Internet is currently structured is due to certain early design choices that have been reinforced by repeated use. That is to say, the way that browsers navigate the Internet, how websites choose to present information, and how software applications display and store information is on account of habit. To Lanier this is nowhere more apparent than in the way that the notion of a “file”—in which different bits of information are organized and stored—has become an apparently indispensable facet of Internet use. However, as Lanier points out, this was not always the case: one of the earliest designs of the Internet by Ted Nelson (his Xanadu) organized all information into one, global source. Nelson’s design, however, lost out and the habit of thinking that information can only be stored in discrete bits won out. This is a great illustration of the way that habits truly become second nature for us. As Lanier well notes, “The idea of the file has become so big that we are unable to conceive of a frame large enough to fit around it in order to assess it empirically.”<sup>[13]</sup>

In short, if the notion of neuroplasticity presents us with the idea that habit takes a physical form (and needs constant reinforcement to be structurally maintained), then the design habits of information systems present us with the prospect of fully digitalized habits. Indeed, it is difficult to keep these notions apart; the neural structures of fossilized habit within our brains can be changed by the digital habits of information systems. And, of course, the opposite is also possible: the habit (displayed by certain early designers of the Internet) of conceiving of information as something best organized into highly individuated bins or files has become a digital habit of the Internet itself. Now, every time we open or close or save a file we are all habituated into thinking of information in this way.

There is much more to be said about all of this, and certainly far more that we can say about where habit research is headed. We have certainly left much unsaid about the role that habit will continue to play in our understanding of the myriad concepts dealt with and not dealt with in the present volume. Nevertheless, our hope is to impart to the reader a sense of just how indispensable the concept of habit has been, and will continue to be, in the history of Western culture. The

future of a volume on habit—which no doubt depends on the habit of solitary, prolonged reading, open democratic communities, and the renewed promise of free discourse—is itself wrapped up in the future of the concept of habit itself.

Even though we have singled out two specific directions for the future of thinking about habit (brain science, information systems/digital media), we do not want to leave the impression that these are the most promising or even the most important lines of research, even if they are the most obvious at this historical moment. Our collection will have built a case against the idea that the brain is the exclusive locus of habit or that human behavior is merely the result of an individual's placement within an information system—claims like this are reductionist in the sense that they restrict the scope of habit to one domain, namely, the human body in its physicality. In this way many contemporary approaches to habit and habituation are less advanced than they are narrow in view. This is not to say that the progress of neuroscience, for instance, has not and will not continue to yield valuable new insight into the nature and function of habit in the human body. (Indeed, it will.) It is to say instead that habit is never simply an aspect of what people do or what occurs in their bodies, and it is much more than a name for what happens when humans mimic machines.

## NOTES

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1. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1918), 104.

2. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 105.

3. Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*," in

Visual and Other Pleasures (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 33.

4. See, for example, the recent book by Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2012), which continues this tradition.

5. Félix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, trans. Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair (London: Continuum, 2008), 37, *passim*. See also the editor's Introduction for a useful overview of the philosophy of habit.

6. See, for instance, the second chapter of Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek, *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism* (London: Continuum, 2009). See Clare Carlisle's contribution below (chapter 7) on Schelling and Ravaisson.

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), Book IV, §295.

8. See, however, the work of Mark Sinclair (Manchester Metropolitan University), who is engaged in important research on both Heidegger and habit, as well as the so-called pragmatic reading of Heidegger contained in Mark Okrent, *Heidegger's Pragmatism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

9. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 135.

10. For plasticity in Darwin, Peirce, and James see chapters 8 and 10 in the present volume, along with John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), Part 2.

11. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 27.

12. "Unconscious" should not be taken as entailing an allegiance to the Freudian model of mind. Instead, it just mean something like "explicitly unrecognized" or unreflected in consciousness.

13. Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 13.

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# Classical Accounts of Moral Habituation



## Chapter 1

# Habituation, Habit, and Character in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics

Thornton C. Lockwood

The opening words of the second book of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* are as familiar as any in his corpus:

Excellence of character results from habituation [ethos]—which is in fact the source of the name it has acquired [êthikê], the word for “character-trait” [êthos] being a slight variation of that for “habituation” [ethos]. This makes it quite clear that none of the excellences of character [êthikê aretê] comes about in us by nature; for no natural way of being is changed through habituation [ethizetai].<sup>[1]</sup>

Equally familiar, unfortunately, is the depiction of Aristotle's notion of character formation as a form of habituation or repetition of actions which results in a “habit.” As a nineteenth-century commentator remarked on the passage above, “a mechanical theory is here given both of the intellect and the moral character.”<sup>[2]</sup> From a Socratic perspective, such a view of becoming good seems hopelessly rigid and unconnected to the intellectual development which knowledge of the good requires.<sup>[3]</sup> Habit and habituation in Aristotle seem eminently familiar and eminently non-philosophical.

Such a view would be mistaken on at least three counts. First, the notion of character formation (to use the broadest possible term for the phenomenon of habituation) in Aristotle is significantly more complicated than the notion that through habituation one develops good habits which are what we mean by ethical virtue. Although character formation includes the development of proper emotional responses, such as taking pleasure in what is fine and being repulsed by what is shameful, it is equally concerned with cognitive development independent of the intellectual virtues. Second, although Aristotle's terms for “ethics” (êthica), character-trait (êthos), and habituation (ethos, ethismos, or ethizetai) are linguistically and conceptually interrelated, his notion of “ethical state” (hexis) is both linguistically and conceptually quite distinct from the notion of “habit,” at least as we use that term today. As one Aristotle translator has put it, “A hexis is not only not the same thing as a habit, but is almost exactly its opposite.”<sup>[4]</sup> For Aristotle, a hexis is a dynamic equilibrium which, although always productive of virtuous actions, is nonetheless the basis for being virtuous in varied circumstances. Third, once Aristotle's notion of a character state is retrieved from its false association with “habit” and repetitive habituation, one sees both that its apparent divorce from practical reason is more a fixture of Aristotle's analytical method and that its connotations of inflexibility or fixedness are in fact antithetical to Aristotle's description of ethical virtue. Rather than view ethical “character” in its Greek etymological sense as an indelibly fixed or engraved mark or stamp



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