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PHENOMENOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF HABIT: REASON, KNOWING AND SELF- PRESENCE IN HABITUAL ACTION

abstract

*Paul Ricoeur claims in *Freedom and Nature* that delimiting the domain of habit is deeply challenging, owing to the fact that we tend not to know exactly what it is that we are asking about. Habit, he says, is not like acting, sensing or perceiving but is more akin to a way of sensing, perceiving and so on. It has to do with settled or dispositional ways of engaging the world that provides a form to our world relations.*

But what is the status of these ways of acting etc.? In ordinary discourse, habits are often thought of as good or bad and even as important to shaping our personal and social identities. But they tend also to be thought of as actions in which the free exercise of reason is deeply attenuated, as automatic responses conditioned over time which are triggered by the environment such that we act 'before we know what we are doing'.

In what follows, I want to offer some reflections about the nature of the relationship between habitual action, reason and knowledge. I will draw mostly on the phenomenological tradition in asking the question whether habits denote performances in which thinking is absent or whether they involve a spontaneity in which the embodied and embedded subject comes to expression as subject. In doing so, I will (1) sketch an outline of the largely negative view of habit that tends to dominate specialized and ordinary understandings of the matter before, (2) looking to phenomenological insights that offer a more positive view by integrating the notion of habit with discussions of embodiment and hermeneutic consciousness. Here, I will refer to the work of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur, for whom habit is an irreplaceable way of knowing the world. My claim is that these phenomenological resources are not only important in establishing the centrality of habit for identity formation, as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty do, but that they entail a unique form of knowing or exercise of reason which is dynamic, attentive and imaginative.

keywords

Habit, knowing, phenomenology, embodiment, hermeneutics

”To acquire a habit does not mean to repeat and consolidate but to invent, to progress.”

Paul Ricoeur

Paul Ricoeur claims in *Freedom and Nature* that delimiting the domain of habit is deeply challenging, owing to the fact that we tend not to know exactly what it is that we are asking about (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 280). Habit, he says, is not like acting, sensing or perceiving but is more akin to a way of sensing, perceiving and so on. It has to do with settled or dispositional ways of engaging the world that provides a form to our world relations.

But what is the status of these ways of acting etc.? In ordinary discourse, habits are often thought of as good or bad and even as important to shaping our personal and social identities. But they tend also to be thought of as actions in which the free exercise of reason is deeply attenuated, as automatic responses conditioned over time which are triggered by the environment such that we act ‘before we know what we are doing’.

In what follows, I want to offer some reflections about the nature of the relationship between habitual action, reason and knowledge. This will not be comprehensive and seeks only to temper a certain one-sidedness in discussions of habit. I will draw mostly on the phenomenological tradition in asking the question whether habits denote performances in which thinking is absent or whether they involve a spontaneity in which the embodied and embedded subject comes to expression as subject. In doing so, I will (1) sketch an outline of the largely negative view of habit that tends to dominate specialized and ordinary understandings of the matter before, (2) looking to phenomenological insights that offer a more positive view by integrating the notion of habit with discussions of embodiment and hermeneutic consciousness. Here, I will refer to the work of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur, for whom habit is an irreplaceable way of knowing the world.

My claim is that these phenomenological resources are not only important in establishing the centrality of habit for identity formation, as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty do, but that they entail a unique form of knowing or exercise of reason which is dynamic, attentive and imaginative. But first to the more negative appraisal.

1. In the *Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle makes explicit mention of habits but only to dismiss them as irrelevant to intelligent acting. Ryle is concerned with offering an account of “knowing how” which is essentially distinct and irreducible to propositional “knowing that” inasmuch as it is enacted rather than enunciated.

But he is clear that “knowing how” is not to be identified in any way with the notion of habit. Habits, along with explicit propositions, in fact, make up the two poles in whose tension the notion of dispositions is held. For Ryle, the disposition is an engaged, mindful and dynamic way of knowing which is made manifest as responsive to the demands of a situation. This responsiveness requires revision of the classical Cartesian account of knowledge because the intelligence involved in responsive dispositions does not involve something *that* we know but is rather an enacted intelligence. Still, such enacted *knowing how* is not to be identified with habituality.

While Ryle is often described as a thinker with strong behaviorist sympathies, his account of dispositions must rather be understood as an explicit attempt to distance himself from behaviorism inasmuch as he thinks of dispositions as incorporated ways of knowing the world which are not automatic. On the other hand, behaviorist claims seem to very much determine the way he thinks about habits. To act from habit, he says, is “to act automatically and without mind to what one is doing” (Ryle, 2000, p. 42). Following a famous cue from Aristotle, Ryle describes habits as ‘second natures’ but goes on to say that these second natures consist of drill and the rote learning of basic skills or facts which can be reproduced or recited without significant use of intelligence. When a child learns to recite the multiplication tables, she does so in a way that lacks any meaningful mental engagement. She merely repeats the words in the way a parrot might. So while dispositions involve a non-propositional application of intelligence that is dynamic, adaptive and progressive, habits are blind and thoughtless and are incorporated into actions as reflexes. He claims that while “drill dispenses with intelligence, training develops it” (Ryle, 2000, p. 42). A habit, then, is a stock response, lacking in dynamism, which is always the same, and which issues forth in answer to a specific stimulus. A habit might, of course, appear to be intelligent (the multiplication tables are the manifestation of an intelligence) while a disposition might appear to be a reflex (as when the chess player makes a spontaneous move without appearing to deliberate) but we must not let ourselves be deceived. What separates the habit from the disposition is (a) the extent to which the agent appropriates the knowledge as *her* knowledge and, (b) the capacity to engage with the world on the basis of this knowledge in a way that is innovative. Acting from habit denotes, for Ryle, a type of performance that is static because its meaning in wider contexts of significance remains largely opaque for us. As such, habitual action cannot be considered to manifest knowing in any genuine sense.

This view of habit is typical of the way it has come to be thought by philosophers and in ordinary discourse. Even one of the great thinkers of the formation of subjectivity in habituality, Heidegger, tends to present habit in a largely negative

light. Take, for example, the social expression of habit in Heidegger's discussion of Dasein's public everydayness (Heidegger, 1962, p. 213). Ordinary everydayness is presented, by Heidegger, as incorporating and reproducing ways of being, talking and thinking about the world, oneself and others which are intelligible in a sense but which cannot be considered to manifest genuine knowing. For Ryle, learning the multiplication tables also contained a certain intelligibility in the sense that the tables themselves are the product of intelligent organizations. When I repeat them, however, I am not doing so intelligently but spontaneously and without thought. Likewise, for Heidegger, the idle talk (*Gerede*) of the 'they' (*das Man*) is not lacking in intelligibility and he even concedes that it is a way of disclosing the world. And yet the Dasein which discloses in such talk does so in a mode of "groundless floating" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 221) which "not only releases one from the task of genuinely understanding, but develops an undifferentiated kind of intelligibility, for which nothing is closed off any longer" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 213). Habitual ways of being and acting, as such, distract, uproot and alienate Dasein from Being-in-the-world by dissolving individual Dasein into an inauthentic self-forgetfulness or an amorphous 'they' that is everyone and no-one. This contrasts with authentic self-appropriation which is made possible on the basis of radically disclosive experiences that reveal the singularity of Dasein, not apart from the world but in the network of world and other relations.¹ So for both Ryle and Heidegger, the problem is not so much that habitualities lack intelligence but that the intelligence is not genuinely expressive of the habitual agent. Whether this lack is the lack of enacted rational agency (Ryle) or of an authentic self-relation (Heidegger), the point is that they involve ways of being, thinking and acting which are incorporated in *me* but which are not really *mine*. Heidegger is concerned here with habitual ways of making sense which are, to be sure, much more complex than what Ryle has in mind with the concept of habit but what both discussions have in common is the presentation of incorporated ways of acting as lacking in understanding or dynamism, as stock and as falling away from a genuinely intelligent engagement with oneself and the world.

What these accounts have in common is a commitment to the idea that authentic world engagement must revolve around an immediate kind of self-transparency. The problem with habits is that they inhibit transparency through the incorporation of ways of being and acting that are, from the start, thoughtless or

1 There are other places in Heidegger's text which could fruitfully be discussed with regard to our theme. Not least of which is his analysis of the primordially of Dasein's practical engagement with the world. As is well known, Heidegger provides detailed analysis of the way in which the world is first and foremost encountered as a network of significances which are ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*). These are eminently relevant because of the fact that it argues for a world relation that is shot through with habituality. For Heidegger, habit is essential to any understanding of human Being-in-the-world. However, my claim here is simply the minimal one that the overriding concern for authenticity in Being and Time results in a clear ambivalence regarding habits in that they are viewed as both essential and problematic.

which have become so.

2. Habit, Embodiment, Hermeneutic Consciousness: Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur

But must habit be so understood? I want now to turn to certain texts of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur who challenge this view by claiming that habits are, in fact, crucial to the constitution of the individual as individual and to her constitution as knower of the world.²

Their claims will turn out to hang on the importance of embodiment and hermeneutic consciousness for our understanding of what subjectivity is. The idea is that subjectivity does not simply stand in opposition to objectivity but naturalizes or objectifies itself through its Being-in-the-world. This is important for the concept of habit because it enables us to think the objectification process, which partly determines habit acquisition, not as a loss of genuine engagement with the world as subject but as a crucial moment of this coming to expression. At the same time, they are aware that this objectification can reify and become automatism. They simply reject the claim that such degeneration of habit should be identified with habit simpliciter (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 145).

2.1 Habit and Embodiment

As is well known, Merleau-Ponty makes embodiment fundamental to any genuine understanding of the meaning of subjectivity, a commitment which entails thinking of the habitual body not as a 'falling away' of consciousness but a crucial moment in its coming to presence. As such, the formation of habit is considered to be important to the way in which consciousness spiritualizes the world and is naturalized by it such that it becomes important to the constitution of authentic Being-in-the-world. Habit acquisition is a crucial moment in the dialectic between spirit and nature which, in turn, is of crucial importance for the singularization of the subject as knower. As such, habits are intensely individualizing and cannot be considered to stand for a flight away from myself. In many ways, Merleau-Ponty's habits are close enough to Ryle's dispositions even though their import encompasses both considerations of epistemology and also the constitution of personhood and identity.

But is it just a question of terminology that separates Ryle and Merleau-Ponty?

² Merleau-Ponty is not alone in his positive evaluation of habit and habituality. As Dermot Moran has recently pointed out, Husserl's writings are replete with detailed and comprehensive analyses of habits and their crucial role in the constitution of human life at corporeal, social and cultural levels (Moran, 2011, p. 61). These analyses are so important for Husserl's account of rational personhood that they make the various Cartesian caricatures of the founder of phenomenology untenable (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 82). I will not be discussing Husserl in the present context for two reasons. The first is that his coverage of habituality is simply too comprehensive to be done justice to here. The second reason is that our theme is especially about knowing and while this is not alien to Husserl's discussions of habit, he tends mainly to prioritize the role of habit in the constitution of the person.

Is the latter is simply calling habit what the former called disposition? It might appear so given that Merleau-Ponty also discusses thoughtless, automatic actions which he distinguishes from habits such that it might seem that his habits are identical Ryle's dispositions. And yet, the significance of the explicit connection between habituality and embodiment should not be overlooked here. In making this connection, Merleau-Ponty appears to incorporate a naturalistic perspective into his account of knowing in the sense that there is a respiration between the emergence out of and the sinking into nature in the embodied subject's business of knowing the world. For Ryle, by contrast, the concept of disposition was explicitly intended to protect the concept of intelligence against its degeneration into natural being through habit. For Merleau-Ponty, corporeal habits are about "the reworking and renewal of the corporeal schema" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 143) and have to do with the way the body knows the world and is transformed by it (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 143f.). In a similar vein, Ricoeur says that habit, "is a new structuring in which the meaning of elements changes radically" (Ricoeur, 1966, pp. 287-288). Speaking at the level of bodily habit, he follows Merleau-Ponty in thinking of habit as the adaptation of the body to the meaning of the world, the incorporation of that meaning and a new gestalting of the environment through bodily engagement. Again, we see the complex dialectic, which is better described as an interweaving of body and environment, or the body's institution in the text of the world.

This understanding of the meaning of bodily habits is therefore explicitly intended to challenge the way that we think about consciousness and mind. It prompts us to rethink what we understand by the notion of 'understanding' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 146) precisely because the body knows the world, in habit, in a way that is adaptive and dynamic without being self-consciously deliberative (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 145). As he did throughout his career, Merleau-Ponty is here trying to think together that which has traditionally been thought apart; namely consciousness and nature (Merleau-Ponty, 1983, p. 2). As such, he insists that we err in our attempt to makes sense of the constitution of meaning if we do not approach the problem in terms of a deep interwovenness of body and mind.³ While Ryle might be inclined to agree with parts of Merleau-Ponty's reasoning here, the former reflects little on the explicit meaning of embodiment for *knowing how* such that the role

3 It was no doubt for this reason that Merleau-Ponty's later writings show a distrust of even the concept of constitution which he (somewhat unfairly to Husserl) thinks of as a one-way street of 'meaning giving' *Sinngebung*. As an alternative, he uses the notion of institution which seems to capture what was essential to Husserlian constitution while simultaneously acknowledging the way in which the conscious subject is given over to itself in and by nature. See, for example, his lectures on *Institution and Passivity* (Merleau-Ponty, 2010)

of embodiment remains somewhat under-communicated.⁴ It is possible that the largely unthought role of the body accounts for Ryle's wariness of the notion of habit and his dismissal of settled dispositions as thoughtless. For Merleau-Ponty, habits, especially as corporeal, are crucial to the reception and generation of meaning. He claims that "the body has understood and the habit has been acquired when the body allows itself to be penetrated by a new signification, when it has assimilated a new meaningful core." (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 148)

In other words, to be an ego is to be an habitual ego, an ego of capacities. This does not mean that the habitual ego is an entirely predictable ego that mindlessly repeats patterns of thought and action without invention. Quite the contrary. Habits constitute us as having a certain style and are the horizon of our capacity to know the world and to personalize this knowing. But this is a moving, dynamic horizon. Habits are not mechanisms but tendencies or dispositions within which imagination, creativity and spontaneity come to expression.

Habit as a capacity for discovery is, as such, utterly belied when it is described in terms of automatism (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 284). Habits can degenerate into automatism but they are not predominantly this. This point was clearly at stake in Merleau-Ponty's famous and oft cited example of the football player's perception of the playing area:

For the player in action the football field is not an 'object', that is, the ideal term which can give rise to a multiplicity of perspectival views and remain equivalent under its apparent transformations. It is pervaded with lines of force (the 'yard lines'; those which demarcate the penalty area) and articulated in sectors (for example, the 'openings' between the adversaries) which call for a certain mode of action and which initiate and guide the action as if the player were unaware of it. The field itself is not given to him, but present as the immanent term of his practical intentions. (Merleau-Ponty, 1983, p. 168)

This example is usually cited in order to demonstrate the claim that the environment is not primarily encountered as a system of objects, shapes and figures which are to be understood before being engaged.⁵ This is an important point to be sure. What is often overlooked, however, are the implications of this example for the way we think about thinking and

4 This in spite of the fact that Ryle often uses examples of embodied dispositions that would seem to be perfectly compatible with Merleau-Pontyian accounts. He would, however, certainly have been skeptical to the claim that the body can be said to "know more than we do about the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 248)

5 This kind of interpretation is typical of Dreyfus' reading of Merleau-Ponty and is also consistent with environmental accounts of mind found in writers such as James Gibson (Gibson, 1979) and Jacob von Uexküll (von Uexküll, 2010).

knowing. Hubert Dreyfus, for example, has given birth to a certain orthodox reading of Merleau-Ponty on this point that maintains that because the football player is not thinking propositionally about the football pitch or about his body's movement in it, that he is not present to himself as thinking at all (Dreyfus, 2007, p. 356). This goes too far and betrays the point that Merleau-Ponty is trying to make. When the football player engages the field as lines of force, he is specifically engaged in a practical species of thinking that engages the field as a field of possible actions. The game has rules which mean that the lines and spaces have a certain meaning within that context. However, these demarcations do not impel action but invite it and they invite it by opening for a range of *possible* engagements. The football player's habit gives rise to a "probing", as Ricoeur puts it (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 290), which co-creates the meaning of the space in the dialectic of transforming and being transformed. It is therefore not so much that action is 'drawn out' of the agent, but that the agent meets a field of possible action which can be engaged imaginatively only *because* he is thinking.

It is possible that Dreyfus means this too but his focus in these discussions has always tended to be in the wrong place.⁶ He follows Merleau-Ponty in arguing correctly that "movement is not thought about movement" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 139) but would do well to note Ricoeur's insistence that while I do not think the movement, I make knowing use of it such that "we need not say that in habit *consciousness* is abolished but only that *reflexive* knowing and willing are" (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 286). In other words, the creative, spontaneous nature of world engagement in habit is one that justifies thinking of habit as comprising a kind of mindful, practical imagination. The fact that this is not thinking under the species of conceptual, propositional thinking does not mean that it is not thinking at all.⁷ That the football player does not think about the rectangularity of the football pitch or the bio-mechanics of his own movement as he plays is true but focusing only on this question leaves the meat of the account of habit untouched. It tells us what habitual action is not (explicit thinking) but not what it is. While there is more that could be said here, it suffices to say that Merleau-Ponty considers habits to be crucial to the individuation of consciousness and to the life of discovery. Habits are not automatisms that hinder genuine understanding. They denote, rather, the way in which my life is constituted in experience through my own actions

6 On this, see my critique of Dreyfus' reading of Merleau-Ponty (McGuirk, 2013).

7 Precisely this point of the status of practical coping vis-à-vis the conceptual was discussed in great detail in the 2007 debate between Hubert Dreyfus (Dreyfus, 2007a, 2007b) and John McDowell (J. McDowell, 2007; John McDowell, 2007). My point here goes in another direction inasmuch as I am claiming that habitual action is neither a conceptual form of knowing (McDowell) nor an opaque form of coping (Dreyfus).

and the actions of others and the world upon me. The dialectic is what gives the ego to itself as this individual even while we must always remain wary of sedimentations that will dissolve individuality. The traces that the past (both personal and historical), others and nature leave upon us do not close the future as a future of sameness but enable our capacity to meet the future as a new field of possibilities.

2.2 Habit and Hermeneutic Consciousness

But habit is not just a feature of our bodily being-in-the-world. It is also crucially determinative of the socially engaged subject, as we have seen already with Heidegger. While this dimension of habit is rarely broached by Merleau-Ponty, it is central in Ricoeur's treatment of the matter in *Freedom and Nature*.

Ricoeur takes his cue here from Merleau-Ponty, but also from Felix Ravaisson, whose little book *On Habit* (Ravaisson, 2008), with its modernization of the Aristotelian notion of habit as 'second nature', is frequently cited. To be sure, Ravaisson's reflections on the relationship between freedom and nature are interpreted through the lens of Merleau-Ponty but in a way that allows Ricoeur to draw certain unspoken conclusions out of the work of the latter. That Merleau-Ponty himself did not take the discussion in these directions is no critique since it is beyond the ambit of what he is trying to do in *Phenomenology of Perception*. That is, while Merleau-Ponty's exploration considers the dialectic between naturalized consciousness and spiritualized nature in order to challenge basic assumptions about epistemology, anthropology and ontology, Ricoeur brings these to bear in a more comprehensive evaluation of habit as such. Thus, his approach is thoroughly phenomenological and Merleau-Pontyian⁸ while it tries to match the sweep of Ravaisson's discussion. In other words, Ricoeur's discussion is anchored in a more comprehensive discourse about being-in-the-world in which he presents a non-Heideggerian response to a Heideggerian problem, at least as far as the question of habit goes.

In this text, Ricoeur claims that the way habits shape perception and physical competences is analogous to the way in which fore-knowledge both opens new fields of possibilities and comes to expression in new and surprising ways. For Ricoeur:

What I know intellectually is present to me in the same way as the bodily skills I have. What I learn, what is understood in an original act of thought, is constantly being left behind as an act and becomes a sort of body of my

⁸ Ricoeur never cites Merleau-Ponty in *Freedom and Nature*, although he once claimed that his debt to Merleau-Ponty was enormous and that the latter had shaped his thought in immeasurable ways. He said of Merleau-Ponty's thought, that: "il est passé dans mon sang et dans mes veins" (Ricoeur, 1983). I am indebted to Bengt Kristensson Ugglå for this reference.

thought: thus knowledge becomes integrated with the realm of capabilities which I use without articulating them anew (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 294).

In this way, he extends the scope of the Merleau-Pontyan discussion in a way that would challenge not only Ryle, but also Heidegger, inasmuch as it suggests another way of appraising habitual ways of thinking and acting. Crucial to this alternative picture is the idea that habituality is adaptive. “There is a wisdom of habit,” Ricoeur says, “which psychology does not encounter as long as it restricts itself to stereotyped forms of conduct” (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 290).

What is learned – at first explicitly – becomes incorporated into the agent’s range of possibilities. For Ricoeur, this is important as a way of describing the nature of our knowing relation with the world. The habit comprises, on the one hand, a kind of cognitive short-cut in the sense that what was first appropriated or learned explicitly need not be rehearsed every time it is called upon.⁹ But it gradually transforms our encounter with the world and generates capacities that make possible a new ease of engaging and knowing.

This claim is explicitly rooted in his understanding of the nature of subjectivity and the meaning of the first-person perspective as it is used in phenomenological research. In one of the finest presentations of the paradox of this perspective, Ricoeur explains habituation as a slipping away from itself of the subject where the incorporation of the business of thinking makes it partially opaque at the level of explicit consciousness and opens for the spontaneity of the subject to be a surprise to itself. He says that:

The strange presence within me of my intellectual experience...laid down by the activity of thought itself...seems to objectify thought completely. And yet the paradox which seems ruinous for a philosophy of the subject receives full significance only for it, for what is presented as an enigma is *my self* becoming a nature by virtue of time; an “it thinks” is present in the “I think” (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 294)

This was very much the point in Merleau-Ponty’s example of the football player’s engagement with the field of play in the sense that at stake was a decentring of the thinking agent in a way that is yet not self-forgetful or alienating. A version of this point is also found in Ravaisson, who claims that,

In descending gradually from the clearest regions of consciousness, habit carries with it light from those regions into the depths and dark night of nature. Habit is an acquired nature, a *second nature* that has its ultimate

⁹ Ravaisson addresses the same point when he notes that the effort of consciousness is effaced over time (Ravaisson, 2008, p. 59)

ground in primitive nature, but which alone explains the latter to the understanding. It is, finally, a *natured* nature, the product and successive revelation of *naturing* nature (Ravaisson, 2008, p. 59).

Leaving aside the somewhat unfortunate language of the 'dark night' of 'primitive nature', the point to note concerns an othering of consciousness into nature in which self-presence becomes partially opaque. I become a mystery to myself because of the forces – both natural and cultural – which shape me as well as the way in which my own experience – corporeal and intellectual – becomes embodied such that they come to expression in ways that are not always entirely transparent for me. In this sense, the insights about the nature of constitution which were offered by Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied subjectivity are carried over into other forms of the contextual embeddedness of the subject.

This insight would be determinative for Ricoeur's later hermeneutic work too, of course, in that it pre-figures the thought, central for hermeneutics, that the constitution of the subject comprises both an origination in the time *before* the subject and also a slipping away in the time *of* the subject (Ricoeur, 1984, 1992).¹⁰ But these opacities of the self to itself are crucially not consigned to either the domain of the sub-personal or the inauthentic. They are instead considered forms of self-othering that operate within the realm of the humanizing of the self as singular knower.

Ricoeur's (and Ravaisson's) positive appraisals of the trajectory of mind in habit are important though for validating forms of knowing which lack thorough transparency. And in saying this, the point is not that habitual action is blind but rather that it operates out of a ground which may have receded from view. Rather than making the habitual action blind, the claim is that the ground that has been formed by habit is the basis for seeing, comprehending and acting. For Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur and Ravaisson, the point is that this humanizing process takes place in a way that is embodied and embedded even to the extent that singularity is constituted in a tension between full transparency and blind opacity regarding the sources of meaningful action.

The difference between this view of habit and that of Ryle (or Heidegger) hangs, then, on the connection of habit to the phenomenology of the body and to hermeneutics (for Ricoeur it is both). For neither Merleau-Ponty nor Ricoeur deny that habit involves a certain opacity of the self to itself. They are clear that habitual action involves an aspect of the self slipping out of

¹⁰ Ricoeur is, throughout his writings interested in the interplay between the involuntary and the voluntary, whether this concern the possibility of novelty in action, as in the fourth study of *Oneself as Another* (Ricoeur, 1992, pp. 88-112) or in language, as in the third study in *The Rule of Metaphor* (Ricoeur, 2003, pp. 74-116).

view for itself. Whether as embodied or historical subject, our being-in-the-world comprises habitualities of mental, social, cultural and physical action, whose originally transparent connection with the will have receded. However, rather than considering such habituality and its attendant opacity as an affront to genuine personhood or to the meaning of human knowing, they suggest that our knowing and being are crucially expressed through these forms.

3
Habit as
the Tension
Between
Spontaneity
and
Automatism

Nowhere is this clearer than in Ricoeur's treatment of the problem of automatism that was so crucial to Ryle's and Heidegger's negative appraisals of habit. In his discussion of the dialectic between "spontaneity and automatism in habit", Ricoeur is able to fully confront the Rylean/Heideggerian prejudice on the basis of Merleau-Pontyian insights in a way that Merleau-Ponty himself did not do. As noted earlier, this is largely because *Phenomenology of Perception* is essentially a discussion of perception and mind that incorporates considerations of habit while Ricoeur's text is a more fully developed phenomenology of habit that builds upon considerations of perception and mind.

When Ricoeur takes up the point, he is able to give Ryle and Heidegger their due by acknowledging the phenomena they point to while simultaneously challenging their interpretation of the meaning of these. Thus, he offers a more nuanced account of habit which is neither wholly positive nor negative. For Ricoeur, habit is always in danger of slipping into automatism. Whether on the basis of aging or a lack of attention, habits can become predominantly expressions of association, repetition and fixation. There is a tendency towards inertia that is inescapable in human life, which tempts us to "resign our freedom under the inauthentic form of custom, of the 'they', of the 'only natural', of the already seen and already done" (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 301). This coheres with ordinary intuitions about habit and both Ryle and Heidegger are right to capture this aspect of the matter. However, Ricoeur insists that while "ossification is a threat inscribed in habit, [it is] not its normal destiny" (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 302). To act habitually is not to act automatically, programmatically or 'without thinking'. This is, rather, a disintegration of habit into the associative such that "the mechanical represents a triumph of automatism over the will" (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 304). Ordinarily, though, habitualities are incorporated skills and knowledge that enable us to engage dynamically with the world in ways that are seemingly effortless. This goes from basic operations such as reaching for a doorknob to comforting an upset student. These actions can become automatisms if we fail to attend to what we are doing and will cause us to err. As Ricoeur

notes, mistakes only occur on the condition that we lose focus on the task at hand, while “a will attentive to the task is stronger than any association” (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 305). Thus understood, “the mechanical which seems to *invade* certain consciousness to the very roots is never completely independent of a definite *desertion* of consciousness” (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 306). The complexity of habit is such that it can fall into unconscious action or give us over to sedimented ways of responding that barely engage with the situation in which we find ourselves. But his point is that this is fundamentally a degeneration of the habitual and not its essence. Following Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur thinks of habit as “the useful naturalization of consciousness” (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 307), and the ‘descent’ of freedom into nature. This complex interweaving is the site of human being-in-the-world. We exist in the tension that can tend towards an excessive form of reflection that seeks to make us entirely self-transparent and a sleep of reason that allows consciousness to become ossified and objectified but both of these are here understood as distortions of the authentically habitual. The importance of Ricoeur’s account here is that he manages to develop Merleau-Pontyan insights into the nature of habit which take seriously our ordinary intuitions about habit – as expounded in the discussions of Ryle and Heidegger – but which place these intuitions in a more comprehensive framework which is derived from the most systematic analysis of habit to be found in the phenomenological tradition.¹¹

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