



# On the role of habit for self-understanding

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## Abstract

An action is typically carried out over time, unified by an intention that is known to the agent under some description. In some of our habitual doings, however, we are often not aware of what or why we do as we do. Not knowing this, we must ask what kind of agency is at stake in these habitual doings, if any. This paper aims to show how habitual doings can still be considered actions of a subject even while they involve a sense of involuntariness and there is a temporal displacement in the self-understanding they afford. It turns out that in some forms of habitual agency, we do not have the relevant intentional description at hand when we are engaged in the process of doing what we so typically do; on the contrary, such a description can only be appropriated with effort and subsequent to the time of the action. I will focus on two approaches to habits, broadly construed; a phenomenological and an action theoretic one, and I will suggest that both approaches focus too narrowly on a synchronic relation between habitual action and self-understanding. I will suggest that we need a diachronic account of the potential for self-understanding required for agency that allows us to explain the experience of diminished control and alienation involved in certain of our habitual actions. The suggested perspective enables us to explain how some habits can be experienced as both momentarily involuntary and unconscious while at the same time they play a significant role for self-understanding.

**Keywords** Agency · Time · Intention · Diminished sense of control · Body memory

## 1 Introduction

An action is typically carried out over time, unified by an intention that is known to the agent under some description. In some of our habitual doings, however, we are often not aware of what or why we do as we do. Not knowing this, we must ask what kind of agency is at stake in these habitual doings. On a busy morning, you might fail to notice

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that you are brushing your teeth because you are thinking about today's meeting, and you might have little to no awareness of any reasons prompting you to take a particular route to work. Such actions are performed habitually, rather than as a matter of conscious intention or choice. How can we ascribe the status of action to these habitual doings of which we have little to no awareness; over which we have little conscious control, and in which no apparent decision is involved; yet of which we believe they belong to us as persons and as agents? One option is that we accept a kind of general or unthinking awareness as part of our agential repertoire: I am not aware of *how* I get up, but I do know, under some description, of course, *that* I am getting up. But, what do we do with the kind of relevant descriptions if they entail a fundamental gap, delay, or disruption in our self-awareness? What do we do with the relevant descriptions if they can't encompass a sense of diminished control or the involuntary aspects of habitual agency?

In order to get a picture of what these involuntary aspects of habitual agency could be and how they are experienced, let us imagine the following: on a regular basis I step into a shared office space and I greet my colleagues. Maybe I always happily exaggerate my 'HELLO!' to one colleague and say a more formal 'Good morning!' to the other. Both colleagues are my friends and no difference is intended. If one were to ask me 'I wonder why you always say good morning in this formal way or always greet me as the last one,' I would not immediately recognize this description. I would not say that I intend to greet one formally and another jokingly; but it would also not be right to say the two different forms of greeting is something I cannot help or a way in which I simply react differently to different people that doesn't amount to a form of action. Thus, when referring to the involuntary aspects of some habits, this is what I have in mind; by no means does that imply a universal claim that all habits are defined primarily by their involuntary aspects, nor does it imply that the ones that are enthrall me to habitual compulsion. The idea is that there are some habits over which I have a diminished sense of control, and my claim is that we should think of this type of habits as as expressing a weakened form of agency. In other words, such habitual doings are neither a blind reaction nor are they merely cases of being atmospherically afforded to move and behave in a certain way. Rather, the particular way of greeting is something I do in a strong personal sense, every day, and as such, it is an action of mine. Upon being addressed with the fact that I greet in a particular way, I will have *to rediscover* who I am, by discovering what it is that I so typically do.

The idea of rediscovering oneself is essentially tied to openness for transformation, and what might possibly be transformed is one's self-conception. Thus the rediscovery of what I do is not of something I once knew or used to be more consciously aware of, which has been forgotten and now it appears again; the rediscovery is not of something that was lost to me. Rather, the rediscovery concerns a re-commitment, enabled by habits, to being who I am. That is, what is repeated is my self-conception, and I recommit to being who I am with my self-understanding now transformed. Neither lost nor forgotten, the rediscovery concerns my commitment to being who I am, and where as I was who I am all along, I re-commit to myself anew. I do not rediscover an intention, but I appropriate and discover what I so typically do and thereby I recommit to being who I am. However, in order to understand how this can be the case, I will argue that habits do not relate to self-understanding synchronically, but diachronically.

*Synchronicity* in the case of habits refers to the theoretical role of first-personal insight into the intention of one's action. There is a tendency to identify as a hallmark for agency the simultaneous relation between one's first personal insight into one's intention and the action being performed (Davidson 2001, Anscombe 2001, Korsgaard 1996, amongst others). The presence or absence of such an immediate insight either into one's intention or to its practical embeddedness in certain embodied behaviours determines whether something is considered an action. Practically, this means whenever a person acts, she is in position to immediately know either the intention with which she is doing something, or she would understand more broadly which practical activity she is engaged in, although she is performing it unthinkingly. Thereby, the awareness of habitual actions is synchronically related to the possibility for self-understanding. *The Synchronicity Assumption* can be formulated as follows: The full self-understanding afforded by an agent's awareness of her habitual behaviour is immediately available by the time of the awareness.

As I will attempt to show, in some of our habits, we come to re-discover what we are doing and this re-discovery has the form of a diachronic surprise; oh, this was me all along. The structure of agency in some of our habits thereby takes on the form of a possible re-commitment; we can either refrain from or repeat what we are so typically doing. The central claim of the paper is that the acceptance of the synchronicity assumption does not allow for a proper assessment of the specific kind of agency at stake in those habits that are characterized by the abovementioned involuntary aspects. From the synchronicity assumption it follows that self-understanding is directly available for the agent either as awareness of embodied practical skill and pre-reflective engagement or in the form of an intentional description of the action. Yet, it is precisely this form of awareness that is unavailable in the case of the habits that involve diminished control. However, with a diachronic account of habitual agency, it will be possible to conceptualize forms of agency where the agent experiences diminished control of her doings and even self-estrangement due to the involuntary aspects of habit.

In what follows, I will unfold the difference between the how and the why of an action while emphasizing that in some cases we are not yet aware of how we do certain things, even though they are considered personal in a strong sense. Thus, the paper aims to show how agency can still be assessed as one's own while involving such delays, temporal displacements and a diminished sense of control. This does not mean that all forms of habit are involuntary, or experienced as such. Rather, the paper argues that we need a diachronic account of agency in habits if we are to understand how some aspects of what we so typically do are done by us with little to no awareness, little to no control, and evades any immediately available intentional description. It turns out that for some forms of habitual agency we do not have the relevant description at hand when we are engaged in the process of doing what we so typically do; on the contrary, such a description must be labourously acquired for it to depict an action of one's own. The psychological reason explaining habitual action is one we have to find such that we see how it could have been part of our intention for acting the way we so typically do.

I will first focus on two approaches to habits, a phenomenological and an action theoretic one, and suggest that both approaches focus too narrowly on a synchronic relation between habitual action and self-understanding. Then I will look at forms of body memory to investigate further how a temporal self-distance is involved in coming

to understand who is acting in our habitual doings. The suggested perspective enables us to explain how some habits can be both momentarily involuntary and unconscious while playing a significant role in self-understanding.

## 2 Self-expression in habits

Within the phenomenological approach to habits, broadly construed, we find that bodily habits and skilled unreflective doings come with an emancipatory aspect enabling us to act successfully (Dreyfus 1991; Rietveld 2008a, b; Ravaissou 2008). Habit here serves as a means for self-expression of an embodied relationship to the world; what is expressed is our capacity to move and control movement. At the same time, bodily habits are expressive of a practical form of understanding: We do not first know representationally what a hammer is, but primordially we have embodied knowledge of hammering, which gives the former its meaning (Heidegger 1998). This meaning is rooted in and shaped by our body schema and our operative intentionality:

The normal subject has his body not only as a system of current positions, but also, and consequently, as an open system of an infinity of equivalent positions in different orientations. What we called the “body schema” is precisely this system of equivalences, this immediately given invariant by which different motor tasks are instantly transposable. This is to say that the body schema is not merely an experience of my body, but rather an experience of my body in the world, and that it gives a motor sense to the verbal instructions. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p. 142)

The body schema refers to “the body’s nonconscious appropriation of habitual postures and movements, its incorporation of various significant parts of the environment into its own experiential organization” (Gallagher 1995, p. 226, see also Gallagher 2005, p.26) and it tells of how our way of inhabiting the world; that is, of the situated and practical relatedness between embodiment and a pre-reflective worldly understanding. We take up a position in the world as self-expressive beings that inhabit hats, hammers, glasses, and rooms: they participate to the “voluminosity of one’s own body” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p. 145): “Habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments” (ibid.). The acquisition of habit happens as the embedded body understands, not this or that propositionally, but practically by inhabiting a relation of sense and significance: “To understand is to experience the accord between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the realization – and the body is our anchorage in a world.” (ibid., p. 146) That is, “[t]he body is our general means of having a world.” (ibid., p. 147) In this sense, habits are expressive of self; namely, of a self that is significantly embedded in – and thus inhabits – a world and this practical relation of significance is what is expressed in habits. Habit is not a question of activity or passivity but of acquiring a second nature, i.e., being capable of inhabiting a world (Aristotle 1999; Dewey 2007; Ravaissou 2008), and as acknowledged thinkers (Ricoeur 2007; Husserl 1973, 1989; 1998) habits are thus first and foremost a transcendental means for acquiring a world of meaning. The phenomenological point is here, that subjectivity

is constitutively embedded in a world, and habits form part of the structure that enables us to acquire this world as a world of meaning. For the present purpose, it is less important to which extent embodiment has a larger scope than habits, since, no phenomenologist would disagree that embodied habitual patterns are structurally constitutive of the world as a phenomenon. The problem to be targeted is whether embodied engagement provides a sufficient explanation of the self-understanding required for habitual doings to amount to agential actions; which I shall argue it is not.

The structure of embodied subjectivity in habits is tied to self-expression such that a free agent is free relative to a field of practice (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p. 462 ff.; Rietveld 2008b). As creatures of practical skill, we respond to certain affordances of our surroundings pre-reflectively. The individual's responsiveness to affordances is experienced as an affective allure, which means that we are simply either drawn or repulsed by something, without or before being consciously aware of this. It is not the case that we are self-aware of self-conscious while running after busses or biking with ease; we are merely affected and attracted to move in a certain way (Rietveld 2008a, p. 132; 2008b, p. 468, Romdenh-Romluc 2013). However, being bound to respond in certain ways still entails a kind of freedom:

This freedom does not require anything outside unreflective engagement with things in the context of a socio-cultural practice, let alone the detached attention of a noticing or choosing reflective ego, because the affective allure of another relevant affordance may induce the switch from responding to one affordance to another without the mediation of linguistic articulation, reflection or detached attention. [...] unreflective freedom simply *is* being situated in a field of multiple relevant affordances. Freedom in unreflective action is therefore inherent in (or constituted by) the concerned system of possible actions that the situated skillful body is. (Rietveld 2008a:128)

In this way, because the body is a 'concernful system of possible actions' unreflective freedom translates into the idea that within this field it is always possible to start something new by responding to the multiplicity of affordances, without being reflectively aware of this. So in giving in to the solicitations of the world, we always have the possibility of being differently bound, to begin something new, to unreflectively make a transition from one activity to another, (Rietveld 2008a, p. 148,149; Merleau-Ponty 2012: 479). Shifting from one absorbed, unreflective way of skillful coping to another, say from walking to running, requires *no reflection* or is not motivated by thought or the awareness of an 'I do': "normally the nature of one's first-person experience of responding to affordances is not that 'I do', since there is no reflective subject or ego having the experience. In most cases the individual will not reflect (neither now, nor later) on her experience of the solicitation but simply respond to it." (Rietveld 2008a: p.133) In this way the 'I can' as a pure phenomenological structure precedes the empirical 'I do' (Husserl 1989: 266 ff.) The assertive power relative to a field is what structures our freedom (Merleau-Ponty 2012: pp. 461–2) and this power is embodied in the pre-reflective 'I can' that shapes my body schema. This kind of embodied freedom exists in general as a structure relative to a field, not in particular as 'over there' or with that 'particular shape' (ibid., p. 463); therefore, the structure of embodied freedom

entails the capacity for self-expression in general and is tied to skilled habits structuring its field.

As embodied subjects, we thus anticipate and adjust ourselves to things in the world as we spontaneously respond to the interrelation between ourselves and these things (ibid., p. 466). Thus, “without spontaneous valuations [of what affects us to move in a certain way towards certain things], we would not have a world, that is, a collection of things that emerges from the formless mass by offering themselves to our body as things “to be touched”, “to be taken” or “to be climbed” (ibid., p. 465). “There is an autochthonous sense of the world that is constituted in the exchange between the world and our embodied existence and that forms the ground of every deliberate *Sinngebung*.” (ibid.)

Now, clearly, with a phenomenological emphasis on the pre-reflective and world-enabling structure of habit, we find less of an account of how habitual doings can amount to personal actions that are in fact under my control. Here we might say that granted the embodied nature of intentionality, that is, the unreflective nature of affordances, the role of the reflective self is toned down; the psychological subject plays little to no role in the formation of habit or the body schema, that is, there is no emphasis on our insights into what motivates our habits. As a result, a tendency can be found in the phenomenological approach to drive too deep a wedge between the self constitutive of first-personal experiential life, on the one hand, and the possibility for self-understanding tied to my practical identity as an agent on the other. No account is offered of how something can be constitutive for self-understanding while not being experientially rooted in what is referred to as the mineness of experience, without being pathological. Further, central questions are overlooked namely of how passivity and diminished self-control over time can prevent self-understanding by making temporal self-estrangement part of everyday forms of agency. The sedimentation over time of style and body schema form a pre-reflective capacity for action, and thus the relation to self-understanding is secondary to the formation of habits. Whereas it is acknowledged that this might sound as if habits come very close to merely being subpersonal mechanisms and unthinking responses (Romdenh-Romluc 2013, p. 14, Gallagher 2005, p. 26) it is at the same time argued that because habits are flexible and irregular, and therefore not mechanic; and due to the fact that action can be performed unthinkingly while not always being tied to thinking responses (Romdenh-Romluc, p. 16); we can in fact think of them phenomenologically as actions performed on a personal level.

However, habitual doings do not always entail skill experienced as freedom relative to a field, and some forms of habit result in involuntary and unknown ways of acting, which causes the loss of a natural and self-evident understanding of ourselves as actors in a familiar world. This kind of alienness in our habitual responses to the environment leads us to question the emotional texture of our affective constitution. Some expressive patterns of ours show up before and as disruptive elements of our practical self-understanding (Lear 2011); other habitual doings explicitly question and shatter our practical and embedded social understanding of being in the world (Blankenburg 2012; Ratcliffe 2008). And sometimes we might even experience a deficient self-relation in becoming alienated from our own emotions (Szanto 2017). In this way, habits can return to us as existential questions and lead us to experiential derealization; who did this; why do I keep doing this; or why do I keep remembering this or forgetting that? The temporal distance to one’s own habitual doings is relevant for our understanding of

the responsive dynamic of habits. Skilled coping, embedded engagement and unreflective action therefore form only a subset of habits; more importantly, habits cover a much broader field of habitual body memory and involuntary aspects of diminished sense of control (see Casey 1984, p. 282). If we return to our opening example, we want to know not only that I move in certain fields of attraction, well-being, or comfort and that specific situations might therefore afford me to greet in different ways; we do want to know how I integrate my responsive habitual doings into a form of self-understanding such that I can understand what I so typically do as an action of mine.

With a phenomenological account of pre-personal habits, we do not get access to the relation between motivation and formation of habits, and therefore the question of how habits relate to my self-understanding cannot find any articulation. If my habits are not experienced in any primary and relevant sense *as mine*, how do we account for them as different from anonymous, sedimented behavioural patterns? All of these doings, on a phenomenological account, are equally expressive of my embedded and embodied self. If my self-expressive bodily habits are independent of what I can understand consciously, it seems that the self being expressed is a formal structure that has little to do with the more substantial psychological self that can be sensitive to how one's own habits, emotions or social embeddedness can return to oneself in unfamiliar and surprising ways, and still be experienced as belonging to one. The motive of alienation that comes with the involuntary aspect of habit leads us to question the phenomenological idea of immediate self-expression in habits.

### 3 Intentional under some description

Despite the diversity of analytical approaches to agency, there is a tendency to maintain a strong connection in agency between the self, authority, and self-awareness. Thus, the idea is strongly emphasized in this tradition that habits are to be characterized as a form of behaviour that differs from proper action, at least to the extent that we don't know what we are doing under some description. If the agent performs a doing that she cannot understand as intentional under some description; whatever is done is not an action. Thus, alienating habits are simply binding and blinding forms of behaviour that restrict our free, uncompelled agency or diminish the role of agency leaving us merely able to react. If we cannot provide a conscious intentional description of our actions, such behaviour no longer counts as proper action which is expressive of our first personal authority as agents (Korsgaard 1996). Habitual action might eventually fall outside the scope of what we are responsible for.

According to Anscombe, what makes an action intentional is that we can answer to the question "why are you doing X?":

First, of course *any* description of what is going on, with him as subject, which is in fact true. E.g. he is earning wages, he is supporting a family, he is wearing away his shoe soles, he is sweating, he is generating those substances in his nerve fibres....but the 'Why?' enables us to narrow down our considerations of what he is doing to a range covering all and only his intentional actions. 'He is X-ing' is a description of an intentional act if (a) it is true and (b) there is such a thing as an answer in the range I have defined to the questions 'Why are you X-ing?' That is

to say, the description in ‘why are you contracting those muscles?’ is ruled out if the only sort of answer to the question ‘Why?’ displays that the man’s knowledge, if any, that he was contracting those muscles is an inference from his knowledge of anatomy. (Anscombe 2001, p. 38)

This means, that contracting one’s muscles while pumping water is not part of my knowledge of intention and therefore not part of my action: “If I am speaking out loud as I type, this is not an intentional action, nor can it be something I am doing for a reason.” (Setiya 2017, p.108) Similarly, in our case, if I am greeting my two equally good friends differently, and I am not intending the difference, then it is not done for a reason. As argued by Moran, and here we can keep the greeting example in mind; if it cannot be non-observationally recognized nor first-personally avowed by me that I greet differently, it amounts to no agential doing of mine (Moran 2001). Also for Davidson, to perform an action requires that what is done is done for an intentional reason: “A man is the agent of an act if what he does can be described under an aspect that makes it intentional” (Davidson 2001, p. 46) And further: “Action does require that what the agent does is intentional under some description, and this in turn requires, I think, that what the agent does is known to him under some description.” (ibid., p. 50) This means that “[a] man who raises his arm both intends to do with his body whatever is needed to make his arm go up and knows that he is doing so. And of course the cerebral events and movements of the muscles are just what is needed.” (ibid.) But although the man might not know “the names or locations of the relevant muscles, nor even know he has a brain, what he makes happen in his brain and muscles when he moves his arm is, under one natural description, something he intends and knows about (ibid.). We cannot appeal to pre-conscious systems, subintentional mechanisms (Steward 2009), nor muscle contractions, if we want to understand why something is an action.

Thus, of course, we could approach intention in habits in the following way: If someone while greeting her colleagues habitually is not aware of what is going on, that is, if this person would reply to the why-question that she is greeting, while leaving out the habitual aspect of doing so jokingly or formally; we would have to ask further, how can it be that even under some description, we might not grasp *the way in which something is habitually done*. The latter question points to how certain aspects of our own agency seem shut off to us at first glance, and this is what must be accounted for. Independently of how we conceive of Anscombian, Davidsonian or Korsgaardian concepts of *reasons for actions*, we inevitably find that a doing that is not intentional under a description is not an action. That something is intentional under some description leaves us enough room to interpret what it means to enter a room of friends or colleagues. There is of course some description according to which I perform my greeting actions intentionally; I do know why I am entering the office space; I am getting to work; I do know that I am greeting; I am performing a cultural gesture. If I am compelled or otherwise not capable of stopping what I am doing, I am not acting intentionally. If I infer parts of what I am doing, say that I must be contracting my muscles while waving my arm greetingly, this is not an intentional aspect of my action. I am waving my arm, of course, but not with the intention of contracting my muscles. Whereas as there might not be one and only one description available to me of what I am doing, there is a scope within which waving-my-arm-exaggerated-jokingly sets up a

scope in which I know why I perform my habits. If I can't recall greeting differently, because I didn't intend to do so, then there was no intention to be forgotten to begin with, and thus we can say; greeting in this or that way makes no difference to whether or not an action was performed intentionally. Or to put it differently; knowledge of whether I greeted my friend in this or that way has little to do with how we conceive of intention in action. Importantly, the cases where the why-question does not apply might involve knowledge by observation, as when I observe myself, upon being told, greeting two friends differently. Here it might be said that as an agent I have "merely attributional' knowledge of [my] state of mind, the access [I have to myself] is based on observation, and [my] reference to [my]self is mediated by some identifying description" (Moran 2001, p. 133). In this case, where knowledge about one's intention is merely attributed, the corresponding self-knowledge is rooted in intransparency and self-observation and it might provide a psychological explanation of my action; which makes self-understanding a result of a discovery. According to Moran, however, self-understanding is tied to first-person avowal which serves as a condition for rational agency (ibid., p.127) and thus rational agency must be rooted in resolution and avowal of one's intentions to qualify as having first-personal authority and entailing self-knowledge (ibid., p. 84 ff.).

However, if we do not know *how* we perform our actions habitually, we might ask which status these doings have. The intention provides a reason for one's action, and if a great part of one's actions falls outside the available intentional description of what one is doing, then we overlook the affective root of some of our actions. Let me try to explain what I understand by the affective root of some of our actions: If a friend asks me a question, I do not simply answer the particular question, I also *affectively respond* in a certain way to this particular person. In the same way; greeting is a way of answering to entering a shared office space; but I also respond to the persons in the room being my friends. If these responsive aspects of my doings are left out, a great part of an inter-affective structure falls away. Or to put it differently, the responsive aspects of my habitual mode of acting do not simply serve as causes (my friend asks me a question and I *react* in this particular way); they serve as part of my reason for acting as I do (*because my friend* asks me something, I am inclined to *respond* in this particular way as I answer my friend). Were we to understand these habitual influences rather as something external to the action itself, we would conceive of them as causal influences that have little to do with action. On the contrary, however, these responsive aspects do form a part of our reason to act in a certain way towards a particular friend. At least as long as we can assume that a question can return to me of the following form; "am I only behaving this way, and do I only have this inclination, *because* of my memory of [a] past experience?" (Hampshire 1982: p. 84) In case of entering a shared office space, the past experience could be of this colleague not wanting to be disturbed, being sensitive to stressful situations or sensitive to exaggerated greeting behaviour. The contrast here is between mere causal behaviour and having a reason for one's actions. Is it the case that something beyond one's formal or friendly greeting behaviour can influence one's action while still being part of the reason for my action? If we grant that past experiences can form part of one's reasons for responding in certain unacknowledged ways, we must answer yes to this question. Something beyond the intention that I am non-observationally aware of can influence me and form part of my reason to act in a certain way; thereby exposing me to gaps in my agential

motivation while at the same time leaving it open for me to self-surprisingly becoming aware of what I am doing. I will return to the relation between memory and habit in the following sections, for now we must acknowledge that being intentional under some description will not give us a sufficient understanding of how habits can be characterized as being part of an agential structure.

The force of an action theoretical approach to habits is that action is fundamentally tied to self-understanding in a broader sense; if we don't know what we are doing or cannot answer to the why question, we cannot be acting, we are merely reacting. This looks as if the kinds of actions that we do believe would fall under the category of habit, namely habitual patterns of behaviour, might still under some description count as actions, and not just sub-personal unthinking doings of ours. However, there is a difficulty in this approach to understanding how temporality and intention play a role for self-understanding. The action theoretic approach maintains a strong connection between agency and first personal authority. However, this comes at the expense of making only the most controlled and reflective actions expressive of agency. When control, first personal authority and agency is tied too closely together, we miss out on how many of my doings might still belong to me in a strong personal sense yet without me intending them as such. Further, when an action returns to me in the form of a question; why am I greeting my friends differently, then the relation between the involuntary aspects of my habits and my self-understanding is exposed in such a way that we must investigate the responsive aspects of habitual agency. If we argue with Bratman that intentions form a certain commitment over time (1987), what we want to understand is *how* the kind of worldly commitment that binds my intentional description of what I am doing, can be *larger* than what I can actually commit to, which therefore leaves my control susceptible to incision, disruption, gaps, rupture.

#### 4 Making a case for the involuntary in habit

The experiential structure that I am interested in is one of in-transparency, and the idea I wish to convey is that self-withdrawal in our agential life that points to a responsive structure of our actions. The reason why such involuntary structures are interesting for our understanding of agency is due to the tension between a diminished sense of control and the intimate familiarity in habits. We want to understand how the involuntary aspects of habit are more than just impersonal happenings, since it goes on in my name. How can something so strangely intimate and at the same time impersonal not belong to me in any strong and personal sense? The idea is that we can learn something about responsiveness of agency and the experience of answerability by studying the involuntary aspects of habits.

Let me try to unfold this idea while looking into a phenomenological idea that does attend to some of the involuntary aspects of habits, namely the idea of bodily memory argued for by Thomas Fuchs. The notion of body memory allows us to study the tension between doings of ours with diminished control that at the same time belong to me. The formation through repetition of flexible habitual structures that enable us to have a world is also the reservoir of a certain kind of memory; namely non-representational body memory:

Through the repetition and superimposition of experiences, a habit structure has been formed: well-practiced motion sequences, repeatedly perceived gestalten, forms of actions and interactions have become an implicit bodily knowledge and skill. Body memory does not take one back to the past, but conveys an implicit effectiveness of the past in the present. ... The body is this the ensemble of organically developed predispositions and capacities to perceive, to act but also to desire and to communicate. Its experiences anchored in body memory, blanket the environment like an invisible network which relates us to things and to people. (Fuchs 2012, p.73)

Body memory differs from representational memory as it does not take us back to the past in the sense of representing events to us that have taken place; rather it affects us and is effective in the present (Fuchs 2018). Fuchs considers this effectiveness under the name of a horizontal understanding of the dynamic “unconsciousness”; the body is seen as the ensemble of organically developed capacities to perceive, act, desire and communicate and these capacities are tied non-representationally lived fields of attraction and repulsion; as well as to forms of inter-affectiveness in which we as lived bodies affect and resonate with one another on a purely lived level:

The unconscious pre-history of intersubjective relations is re-enacted through the intercorporeal memory. However, this means that the unconscious is not a hidden chamber of the psyche any more, but is interwoven in the life style, in the bodily conduct of a person, as a sub-structure which remains hidden from her personally, but becomes visible to others because, in the final analysis, it is always implicitly directed to those others themselves.” (Fuchs 2012, p.79)

Fuchs argues for a horizontal (inter-personal) phenomenological understanding of the Freudian (vertical) Unconscious, because according to him a psychoanalytic version of the unconscious introduces an alienness within the agent that is simply too foreign to be appropriated by the agent herself (ibid., p.72). However, we might ask how Fuchs can arrive at the idea that the agent herself can be struck by her own body memories and by the “*ambiguity or duplicity of consciousness* itself; in such a way that the subject, if she hits on the manifestation of the hidden meaning, at least has an inkling that it is asking her a question, namely about her own otherness.” (ibid., p. 77). The question is, how, if the involuntary and alien aspects of one’s own habitual behaviour cannot be too foreign, do these aspects of our doings return to us as a manifestation of hidden meaning that was our’s all along (ibid., p.72)? Furthermore, it cannot be too foreign to me, but it is visible to others all along, as stated in the quote above, how is that to be understood? And finally; if intersubjectively meaningful but only as a form of bodily resonance (Fuchs 2018), how do we come from bodily non-representational resonance to conceptual self-understanding?

Let us hold on to this idea; there is something at stake in involuntary aspects of habit that can bring one to question oneself about one’s own otherness. We saw that in the suggested greeting example. According to Fuchs, such involuntariness, or in his terms; alienness, can be perceived of by others (it is visible to others, as the quote above says), since it is always implicitly for them and at the same time the alienness is not too foreign, but an alienness that was all along one’s own: “it was always the agent’s own

meaning” (ibid., p.72). What is termed alien is the fact that we do not recognize ourselves in doing what we do, which is illustrated by the greeting example. Clearly, what returns to me as a question might not seem all too foreign to me, but it might still lead to forms of self-questioning; why am I treating some persons as sensitive and why do I want other persons to find me funny, etc. In order to pursue what kind of *inkling can manifest itself in the involuntary aspects of my habits*, let us look at further example provided by Jonathan Lear who suggests that in cases of body memory the body shows what the agent herself cannot tell. Lear investigates the example of one of Freud’s patients, the Ratman, who, when confronted with Freud, would cringe despite the situation not being threatening (Lear 1998, p. 90 ff.) The involuntary aspect of Ratman’s cringing before Freud apparently comes with an adumbration of his will, and with a form of inhibited intentionality. According to Lear, Ratman’s cringe does not express fear, but he acts out a kind of fearful behaviour; the important difference being that his body somehow shows what the Ratman himself cannot tell:

He [Ratman] cannot coherently *say* what he *shows*. He does not understand what he is doing, and he searches for some rationalizing explanation. ...He wants to see himself as acting for a reason.“ (ibid., p. 101) ... “The cringe is, as it were, a blast from the past. And that is why the verbal expression of fear cannot (as yet) replace this cringe. Because of the vicissitudes of internalization and projection, it is as though an uninformed cringe gets preserved in intrapsychic amber. (ibid., pp. 102-3)

Ratman cannot yet appropriate the cringe as being expressed by him; it cannot yet be appropriated into language, nor can intention or reason be found, although this is what the patient himself would try to find. According to Fuchs body memory come over us in a fairly recognizable way, that is, in a way not too foreign for us to grasp or handle; we seem to know what it is all about. However, Lear helps us understand more clearly how foreign such an overcoming might feel; it is with diminished control and the lack of a corresponding self-understanding that Ratman is cringing. Ratman is acting out (Freud 1950), while repeating an old fearfulness. Lear argues that this fearfulness is not the same as fear; as we would know the object of fear. By contrast, we don’t yet know the object or reason for the fearfulness displayed by the involuntary aspects of our habits; we cannot yet understand the way in which this fearfulness is part of a habitual pattern of ours. As a blast from the past, something repeats itself in our habitual doings. Lear goes further than Fuchs in emphasizing not only the uncontrollable aspect of body memory tied to habitual patterns, but also in showing how this acting out returns to us as a question. Ratman is trying to find a reason for his own action and this attempt cannot be rushed. Lear’s psychoanalytic account therefore helps us to address a criticism tied to the Synchronicity assumption; we might ask Fuchs, what the status is of such non-representational bodily memories, if they are to be projected towards meaning, but at the same time are taken to be uninformed expressions preserved in intrapsychic amber. On the one hand, Fuchs assumes that if such expressions are too foreign and alien they cannot be considered mine in a strong sense, but on the other hand, there is *no medium* in which they could become mine. In other words, how can a phenomenological account for the way in which the involuntary aspects of habit are tied to our self-conception? Either it seems, the meaningfulness of something like

Ratman's cringe, is never too foreign and can therefore be immediately understood; in which case body memory comes close to a third-person behaviouristic account of habitual patterns. In this case we would have to see something like Ratman's cringe simply as expressing fear; a behaviour with fixed objective meaning (for a criticism of this idea, see Ingerslev and Legrand 2017a, b). This reduces the experience of Ratman himself being addressed by the diminished control and his sense of a weakened form of agency in the situation. Or, Ratman will experience this cringe as his personal habit, but then we have no account of *how* this pre-reflective meaningful pattern is related to the possibility for self-understanding. In order to understand how something inkling can occur to us we need a diachronic account of the diminished sense of control over time in habitual agency. If habitual patterns were not somehow at the verge of becoming part of our self-understanding in virtue of some kind of responsive structure; they would merely display behavioural reactions.

In archaic outbursts from the past, our habitual doings are delivered over to us with an inkling that takes the form of question or of showing something that cannot yet be told. We must ask: is the role of the bodily involuntary to tell us about what cannot be articulated? Or, is the role of the bodily involuntary *not* to point us towards an "I cannot tell" but to present us with a question *embedded* in the experience of an "I cannot"; namely the question "*why* can I not do otherwise?" If we accept this latter suggestion, however, then we cannot accept the immediately expressive model of body memory that only by accident becomes conscious due to spatial life forces (Fuchs 2012). The problem is that even the phenomenological model of body memory relies on the synchronicity assumption, in expecting that what is bodily memorized can be immediately tied to an agent's self-understanding; otherwise, it is too foreign and we enter the murky waters of Psychoanalysis, vertically construed. What is immediate for Fuchs is the fact that due to an intersubjective field, the meaning of various embodied memories is accessible between us, as it were, where it is being acted out. However, the involuntary aspects of habit as well as the embodied memories present themselves as questions for me to try to come to terms with; and not simply as expressed in intrapsychic amber and thereby available for immediate inter-affective bodily resonance (Fuchs 2018).

Earlier in the paper I suggested we have to re-commit to our habitual doings. The term re-commit alludes to how we discover something about ourselves and thereby we re-commit to ourselves as agents. When I re-commit to my greeting manners as mine, it is not that I find a set of lost intentions that I then take on as being what I meant all along; this would be indeed be adding something to my action which didn't constitute it. Rather, the structure of re-commitment concerns the dynamic role of habits in shaping a way for possible self-understanding. The dynamic relation between habitual action, intentional action and embodied skillful engagement reveals how self-understanding depend on re-committing to what one is already so typically doing. When agency is weakened, that is, when I come to experience a diminished control of my doings, it reflects the agent's possibility for self-understanding and ultimately for the kind of responsibility I as an agent can take for my own actions (see also Jaffro 2017). In appropriating my own habitual actions as mine, I assume ownership for what has been done by re-committing to who I am as a person. That is, I re-commit to being myself. The notion of re-commitment has the advantage that it tells of non-pathological self-experiences of weakened first person insight, while at the same time, it targets a

therapeutic tool; namely that of coming to terms with one's own actions while assuming them as actions of one's own. Only when this dynamic is explained can responsibility in agency be understood anew as transformative, diachronic re-appropriation of ownership over time; it is one's self-conception that is thereby transformed. I was already committed to being who I am while greeting my friends, but discovering my habitual patterns, I re-commit to being who I am by the diachronic self-understanding enabled by some of the involuntary aspects of my habits.

Therefore, for Fuchs, the link here between body memory and inter-affectivity becomes unclear and problematic, for on the one hand the embodied alienness of one's archaic past is accessible to others, because it is implicitly directed towards them, and on the other hand it can never be too alien, since implicitly it must always be mine, otherwise it is too foreign and too vertically (Freudian) unconscious. But, these two aspects were the ones we wanted to understand by looking at the involuntary aspects in habits; namely: how exactly these involuntary aspects are mine in a strong sense and how do I come to understand them *as* mine. The idea of re-appropriation suggests we re-commit to being who we are. However, if we follow Fuchs, the involuntary aspects are already perceivable and understandable to others, since they are for others, and to myself as well, since they are expressions of mine, i.e., they are not too alien for me to experience as mine and I immediately recognize their meaning and understand them as part of my self-conception. If we hold on to the idea, however, that the involuntary aspects of habit *do* present us with a question, namely; why did I do this, or why couldn't I do otherwise, then it seems this very questions is about to be cancelled out by Fuchs' approach, since alienness and ownership turn out to be straight forward after all: the horizontal conception of body memory is reduced to an all too harmonious bodily resonance between us that simply *states* what we want to understand in the first place; namely the *how and why* of the involuntary aspects of bodily habits structured as body memory; *how are they mine; why must I re-appropriate them; and can I even come to re-commit to such alienness as mine?*

While emphasizing how habits belong to our overall reason for doing what we do, the point is that we do not merely attribute an intention for our doing, but the structure of body memory will inevitably be foreign and only possible as foreign in that it can only be projected towards comprehensibility, not be fixed by it. The inkling contained in the questions of the involuntary aspects of our habits is one we have to deal with, and with Gadamer we can say that it leaves us:

challenged by the uncomprehended or the incomprehensible; thereby [we] are put on the way of questioning and hence urged to understand. Indeed, this does not amount to an anticipated dominance over everything meaningful. On the contrary, it is a way of responding to what always presents itself as a renewed challenge, something that cannot be understood; something surprisingly different, alien, dark – and perhaps deep, that we have to understand. And yet this still belittles the paradox that is entailed in the hermeneutics of facticity. Not just this or that uncomprehended, but the incomprehensible as such, the fact to be there, and even more the incomprehensibility not to be there, have to be projected toward meaning (Gadamer 1995, p. 63 [my translation, LRI])

The point is here, that for the question of our habits to entail an inkling for us, it has to be and remain foreign and thereby to project itself towards meaning, rather than being upheld by intersubjective already meaningful bodily resonance. Bodily resonance threatens to mute the question enabled by the foreign and involuntary aspects of certain forms of habits.

## 5 Concluding remarks

I have suggested that we underline the constitutive role of such experienced involuntariness or alienness in our habits as essential to the idea of responsive agency. These habits are experienced as forms of self-displacement where my habits show up before me and return to me with the question of ownership; without these involuntary aspects how could I come to take responsibility for them, how could I come to question my own habits as mine? I am not merely repeating or blindly displaying them in a medium bereft of agency, rather my agency in these cases of body memory is responsive in the sense that I have to take over an answer to a situation that I have already become; I have to re-commit myself to being who I am. The role of habits for self-understanding is found in a form of re-commitment to oneself that differs from unmediated self-expression and these habits do not come with a strong sense of control and intention. We might think of habits as a weaker form of agency that dynamically relates self-expression to self-understanding over time, as a form of commitment, namely by re-appropriation. The commitment is projected towards meaning, but the commitment is always larger than the single habitual action. The structure of commitment is therefore the following; what is characteristic of action is the commitment to more than I might hold; the structure of responsive agency is therefore re-committing to what was mine all along. In weakened forms of agency, self-understanding is a second commitment to being who I am enabled by the involuntary aspects of habits. The key to understanding responsive agency in habit is thus to grasp how we deal with the involuntariness that habit makes manifest to and in us.

In this way, we find in habits not only automatizations of skillful action but an inherently creative self-alienation that helps us becoming who we are. The creative moment is the moment that Maria Talero describes when she describes the past of habits being a reservoir for the possible:

Freedom lies in the *rediscovery* of my habitual past as a *reservoir of possibilities*, indeed, as a vigorous force actively shaping my future at every moment. It lies in our ability to enter into this force, both past and futural, intrinsically rigid and intrinsically flexible, with the stance of one who approaches the world as a place where meaning grows. (Talero 2006: 203 [italics added, LRI])

Importantly, the personal character of what can be experienced as impersonal and involuntary lies in the possibility of *re-discovery*. The idea of rediscovering oneself is essentially tied to openness for transformation, and what might possibly be transformed is one's self-conception. If, in our account of agency in habits, we rely on the

synchronicity assumption, the possibility for self-understanding is co-extensive with one's immediate insight into what one is doing or what one is pre-reflectively engaged in. Even if we grant the involuntary aspects of habit some room as in the case of body memory, self-understanding seems to be immediately available in Fuchs' account. What I have been arguing is that we need a diachronic account of agency in habits, such that in cases of weakened agency I will have to re-commit to being who I am and thus to re-appropriate certain doings of mine as my own. This requires time and a possible transformation of my self-conception. Habitual agency displays diminished control over time while at the same time it is a form of non-pathological behaviour, and by studying the experiential structure of this kind of agency do we gain insight into how self-understanding is shaped. Thus, what I have denied is the tacit assumption that self-understanding is necessarily available at the very time of an action. Rather, it is the possibility of coming, at some time by some means, to understand one's behavior under an intentional description that is a requirement for agency. In cases of strong agency, such self-understanding is immediately available simultaneously with the action. In weaker forms of agency, acquiring such self-understanding need neither be immediately, nor instantly available. For weaker forms of agency it may require both time, soul-searching, and possible even psychological work to acquire the self-understanding provided through an intentional description of one's behavior. However, the behavior in question still counts as agential, because it satisfies the requirement that such self-understanding is available, only in cases of weaker forms of agency it is diachronically and non-immediately available.

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