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Author(s): Jakub Čapek

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Habit and Freedom in Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur

Jakub Čapek

CHARLES UNIVERSITY, PRAGUE

ABSTRACT: Philosophical debates on habit often emphasize its ambivalent character: once habitualized, voluntary activity becomes natural. Consequently, the ambiguity of habit is the ambiguity of freedom and nature. This view was recently criticized by Claude Romano for its lack of conceptual clarity. Focusing on the phenomenology of habit as developed by Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty, and in response to Romano, this article shows not only that habit cannot be stripped of its ambiguity but also how this ambiguity affects our understanding of subject and freedom.

KEYWORDS: phenomenology, habit, agency, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur

Philosophical views of habit were deeply influenced by Aristotle. If we understand habit in relation to *hexis*, to the acquired disposition to act in a certain way, then habit becomes a key phenomenon of ethics. According to the famous quotation, “It makes no small difference, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference.”¹ And yet we can understand habit also as a dull and rigid mechanism, as something that moves us away from humanity, as we read in Immanuel Kant: “The reason for being disgusted with someone’s acquired habits lies in the fact that the animal here

predominates over the man.”² Is habit more an expression of our capacity to shape our lives in the long term or of the predominance of an unhuman nature in us?

In works by Merleau-Ponty and Ricœur, habit is seen precisely as an ambiguous phenomenon. It is something *like* nature and represents both the condition and the limit of our freedom. Nevertheless, these two philosophers neither conclude that habit *is* nature, unlike William James, who sometimes takes habit to be a physiological phenomenon, a “property of matter,”³ nor aim at a metaphysics of nature, unlike Félix Ravaisson, who believes that habit shows the deep unity between spirit and nature.⁴ Merleau-Ponty and Ricœur accept the idea that habit is ambiguous: once habitualized, conscious or voluntary activity becomes more natural and less conscious. This view has recently been criticized by Claude Romano, who believes that the alleged ambiguity of habit is caused by a lack of terminological clarification—that it results from the “undifferentiated concept of habit.”⁵ Our question is, What precisely does the ambiguity of habit consist in? To start with, I will draw on the terminological clarification as suggested by Romano.

Distinctions

The term *habit* can refer to (1) an *acquired capacity or a disposition* to deal with recurrent situations or tasks (“the habit of looking in both directions before crossing the street,” “the habit of mistrusting my first impression of people”). Alternatively, it can refer to (2) the mere *habituation* to something, as when we become used to a new climate after having moved. These two forms of habit were distinguished and analyzed in detail by Maine de Biran under the names “active habit” and “passive habit.”⁶ Besides them, there is (3) a *repetitive or customary behavior*, a “routine,” as Romano calls this. These may be individual routines, such as taking a shower in the morning, buying the same toothbrush (just “out of habit”), or socially shaped routine-like habits such as shaking hands or bowing heads when greeting. The word *habit* refers here neither to a particular capacity I may acquire nor to the passive adaptation to some recurrent circumstance but to a recurring pattern of behavior that is simply done this way and that; on the social level, it may have a highly conservative impact. It is in this respect that the habit can be seen as the “fly-wheel of society.”⁷

In his highly illuminating article “L'équivoque de l'habitude,” Claude Romano distinguishes the three mentioned classes (under the headings *l'aptitude*, *l'accoutumance*, and *la routine*). Apart from this, the word *habit* is used also to express (4) *addiction*, that is, a compulsive inclination that may turn out to be as strong as a need (“having a drug habit,” trying to “kick the habit”). Even if addiction seems to be very different from a typical habit-like behavior, it has, in the philosophical tradition (for example, by Aristotle) been understood as an extreme form of a habit, a habit we are no longer free not to follow.

To anticipate a bit, we can say that both Ricœur and Merleau-Ponty understand habit primarily in relation to skill acquisition and to activity. It is precisely activity that makes acquired skills (the first concept of habit) different from passive habituation, which sometimes means only diminished sensitivity, as well as from mere routine or irresistible addiction. Our question thus assumes a more precise form: Does the ambiguity of freedom and nature reoccur in our activity once it becomes habitual?

Definition

Both Ricœur and Merleau-Ponty accept—each in his own way—the idea of intentionality, according to which our experiences are essentially related to something. Particular kinds of our (intentional) relating to something—of our seeing or hearing something, thinking or judging, and so on—can be described by focusing either on their object or on the way we relate to the object. The latter can be described in many different ways, for example, as more or less habitual. Approached thus, habit is the *degree of habituality* of intentional acts. Even though this definition is clearly circular, it is not futile. Habit does not constitute a separate class of our acts; instead, it determines certain acts as frequent and habitual—as distinct from other acts that are new and unusual. This is precisely how Ricœur approaches the topic of habit: “[Habit] does not seem to designate any particular function, that is, any original intention in the world, since it is defined as an acquired and relatively stable *way* of sensing, perceiving, acting, and thinking. It affects all the intentions of consciousness without being itself an intention. . . . Without being a new class of ‘cogitata,’ the habitual is an *aspect* of the perceived, the imagined, the thought, etc., opposed to the new, the surprising.”⁸ Intentional acts (perception, action, and so forth) can be described in their type independently

from their being either habitual or not. Habit is defined precisely as the “acquired” and “relatively stable” mode of our intentional relations. By stating this, Ricœur brings his concept of habit close to the Aristotelian definition of the term *hexis*.⁹ Habit is a quality of our acts that is acquired and relatively stable (though not unchangeable). It is the second feature—the relative stability—of the habit that may seem to contradict the assumption that our intentional acts are conscious. The more they become habitual, the less we seem to be conscious of them or conscious when executing them. This is why Jean-Paul Sartre suggested that habitual movements call for an extended notion of consciousness (an “un-reflective consciousness”). When stating that “in a general way, one should distrust explaining things by ascribing them to habit,” Sartre implied that it is still consciousness and not habit alone—as an independent principle—that enables us to understand habitual behavior.¹⁰ This is merely a different way to put the same basic conviction: Habit is related to an activity; it is a mode of capacity, not automatism.

Genealogy of Habit

Habit is acquired. Is there anything *before* habit? In something like a genealogical inquiry, both Ricœur and Merleau-Ponty assume that some capacities do exist prior to habit. Ricœur calls them the “preformed skills” (*savoir-faire performés*). A preformed skill is defined as “an initial unlearned power of acting.”¹¹ These capacities are sensory motor units known from developmental psychology: to follow an object by moving one’s eyes and head, to stretch out a hand (which we do not see) toward an object that attracts our attention, to avoid an object that threatens to hit me by moving the whole of my body, to extend my hands and arms before falling, and so on. Unlike reflexes, for example, protective reflexes (the blinking of the eyelids, the flowing of tears when the eyes are irritated, sneezing, coughing, and so forth), “preformed skills” are flexible complexes of behavior capable of variations. For instance, I can follow an object by turning either my head or my whole trunk. What is more, the preformed skills respond not to simple stimuli but to meanings that we grasp in our surroundings (for example, a thing *means* an attraction or a threat). The corresponding movements are not elementary but complex and articulated, both in time and in space. As Gestalt psychology has shown, these skills and the corresponding ways of behaving can be explained neither in mechanical nor in teleological

terms. Since preformed skills have an intelligible and variable structure, they can become an object of further development, of learning, and can be turned into a relatively stable acquired disposition. A phenomenology of habit has to be preceded by an inquiry into preformed skills: “We have to go back to the initial unlearned skills. . . . [T]he enigma of habit is preceded by and contained in that of the preformed gesture which is already an articulated totality governed by perception.”¹²

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty considers these phenomena (under the heading the “body schema”) before dealing with habit.¹³ Before we have learned or habitualized anything, we already have certain—limited but working—power over our bodies and the world. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, the description of habit follows the analysis of the body schema: “acquiring a habit” implies a “reworking and renewal of the body schema.”¹⁴ The difference is only one of degree, because, as Merleau-Ponty states, the “power of habit is not distinguished from the one we have over our body in general.”¹⁵

Both Merleau-Ponty and Ricœur assume that habits are built upon unacquired modes of behavior. Thanks to habit, our ways of behavior become easier and more refined. In addition, their performance may be assumed by the individual to a greater extent than “concrete movements” or “preformed skills.” Through habit, we make capacities that have already been present in our body into our own capacities; we refine them and enlarge our sphere of action. And yet habitual ways of behavior can be autonomous, that is, largely independent from our will and conscious control. It is here that the alleged ambiguity comes into play.

Autonomy of Habit

Until now, habit was the transformation of our preformed skills into habitual capacities. The more these capacities are habitual, the more we appropriate them for ourselves, and the more we enlarge the sphere of our action. Ricœur restates his definition of habit by saying: “Everywhere, habit is an acquired, contracted way of being, which provides capabilities for willing.”¹⁶ And Merleau-Ponty writes in a similar vein: “Habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world.”¹⁷

According to this analysis, habit ensures a higher level of acquisition of a certain capacity and thus can be neither a phenomenon of passivity only (Class 2), nor a stereotype or routine-like behavior (Class 3), nor

irresistible inclination (Class 4). Even though habit—understood as a mode of capacity—is not reduced to a passive habituation to something (Class 2), processes of “adaptation” or “habituation” (the “passive habit”) remain related to habit and may constitute one dimension of it. Ricœur studies and generalizes the case of muscular exercise and says: “It is habit in all its forms which . . . diminishes body’s susceptibility to wonder and shock.” Consequently, adaptation to a new environment cannot be regarded only as pure passivity.¹⁸ In a similar vein, Ravaissou claims that “passive habit” presupposes a hidden or implicit activity.¹⁹ Whereas the “passive habit” can thus be understood as a part of the habit qua capacity, the same does not hold true for the habit in the sense of irresistible inclination (Class 4). Habit itself cannot move us; it is not an addiction that—similarly to a need—moves us in the direction of a satisfaction. Habit does not cause us to do something, or, as Ricœur phrases it, habit is not a source of our activity; it is only its form.²⁰ Consequently, habit is never the opposite of our freedom; it is its constitutive part, or, as Ricœur puts it in terms borrowed from Husserl, it is the “organ of willing.”²¹ What is ambiguous about my capacity to drive a car or play an instrument? If we focus on habit as acquired capacity, and distinguish that from habit as addiction, routine, and habituation, as Claude Romano suggests, no ambiguity remains.

And yet, even if we understand habit precisely in the sense of the acquired capacity, it still is partly autonomous, at least in the following three respects. First, habitual movement or behavior entails complex internal coordination. When executing it, I cannot have in mind the details of my movement. Habitual movement happens “on its own,” in a well-articulated manner, and it can even, with astounding easiness and rapidity, take into account changes in external circumstances. Merleau-Ponty gives the example of the “experienced organist” who is able, even after little practice, to accommodate his concert program to the given instrument, without really rehearsing all the compositions on an unfamiliar organ that has a different number of keyboards, a different set of stops, and so forth.²² In the literature on habit, especially that of the American pragmatists, we find many eulogies on habit that celebrate precisely this skillfulness of the habitual. William James states very clearly: “There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work, are subjects of express volitional deliberation.”²³ At this level, the autonomy of a habit

has to do with the kind of knowledge implied by that particular habit, but not with its independence from the will. The contrary may be true: “An act is that much more available to willing as it is more automatic in its sense.”²⁴

Second, nevertheless, the relative autonomy of habit is not limited to the internal coordination of the respective movements. The way habitual behavior is released or launched may be autonomous in different manners. Some habits are not directly accessible. To activate them, we have to adopt a corresponding attitude or start some other activity. This “automatization in release” of a habit can also take the form of the spontaneity of the habitual movement, which is already independent from the will. Some habitual movements may start from themselves; they can be “activated spontaneously.”²⁵ Every driver accustomed to a manual transmission has to experience this spontaneity in the release of movements when driving a vehicle with an automatic transmission.

Third, habits are constituted not only by the activities that become habitual but also by objects and situations these activities relate to. Objects around us may become “suggestions for action,” not only because they may satisfy some of our needs (such as food or drink) but also because they evoke in us some easy and customary behavior. At one point in his *opus magnum*, Proust describes the moment when the narrator recognizes—on the way home—the back gate of the familiar garden. It is as if the garden and the habit joined forces to take care of him: “And from that instant I did not have to take another step; the ground moved forward under my feet in that garden where for so long my actions had ceased to require any control, or even attention, from my will. Habit had come to take me in her arms and carry me all the way up to my bed like a little child.”²⁶ What is “suggested” by the familiar surroundings is neither the need to be satisfied (rest after a tiring journey) nor the purpose of the movement (going home and to bed) but the *way* the purpose is attained: habitually, without paying attention to, and in full reliance on, *the place*. What is more, familiar places, situations, and instruments become extensions of our own body. Merleau-Ponty gives us the example of a car driver who sees immediately whether he “can pass” through a narrow lane and another example of a woman who “maintains a safe distance between the feather in her hat and objects that might damage it; she senses where the feather is, just as we sense where our hand is.” These observations concerning the objects that are comprehended in our habitual movements even make part of Merleau-Ponty’s definition: “Habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world,

or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments.”²⁷ Consequently, habit may be relatively autonomous not only in its internal articulation and in its activation but also because it sometimes depends more on things and places that we encounter than on ourselves.

What does this tell us about the alleged ambiguity of the habit? The relative autonomy can be analyzed in two directions: in relation to our *knowledge* and in relation to our *freedom*. Habit is relatively autonomous (1) because it shows a kind of knowledge that is different from our explicit self-awareness and (2) because it is—partly—beyond the reach of our will and freedom.

Ambiguities of Habit

The existence of habitual behavior leads us to recognize a particular kind of knowledge: we *can* execute habitualized activities (as well as preformed skills or “concrete movements”) without *knowing* explicitly how. There is a large consensus among different phenomenological authors in taking this to be a form of consciousness (and not a mechanical behavior pattern).²⁸ Though Merleau-Ponty and Ricœur agree on the existence of a particular prereflexive awareness, they diverge in one important respect. Ricœur’s analysis of habit is dedicated to habits that we have chosen to acquire. He explicitly writes: “This study is limited to voluntarily acquired habits which return back to the will and affect it.”²⁹ This is why he can focus on habitual capacities as subordinated to the conscious voluntary act, as “organs of the willing.” Merleau-Ponty does not have this restriction. Consequently, not only the acquisition of a new capacity, such as dancing, but also habits that we acquired without even knowing when and how it happened make up part of our habits. Habits refer to a past we may not have any explicit recollection of, to the “immemorial past,” to the “past that has never been present.”³⁰ They do not refer to oneself as their origin but, rather, to the familiar world one grows up in: “My usual world gives rise to habitual intentions in me.”³¹

It is precisely this *past* dimension of skills and habits that is aimed at by the concept of the “habitual body.” Distinct from the “actual body” (or “body at present”), the “habitual body” summarizes (1) the pastness of habits, (2) their origin in my habitual world, and (3) their particular presence: I may—currently—be charged with habits/capacities I ignore until

some situation or encounter activates them or reveals them as present. Consequently, habits may define who I am before I know this. If habit, or some habits at least, introduces into me the past that is present without being fully known, then habit does imply ambiguity. We can state more precisely what is ambiguous here: the presence of the habit and, consequently, the subject in its self-knowledge.

With his focus on “voluntarily acquired habits,” Ricoeur is closer to the Aristotelian tradition, which takes the formation of habits as a part of the cultivation of the character. Even though Merleau-Ponty understands habits also as acquired dispositions or capacities, he points to a different dimension of our habitual capacities: some of them refer to the immemorial past. They are habits we did not decide to have and are present in our actions without our full knowledge of them.³² The safety or uneasiness of the family milieu can shape a person in a way that he or she never leaves completely behind. This view of habit may be useful in dealing with some contemporary questions even of political theory. For instance, racial attitudes can be described less in terms of prejudices and more in terms of habits, in order to account for the implicit way they shape our intentions and actions.³³

The distinction between a habit as a voluntarily acquired skill and a habit as the involuntary presence of the immemorial past also implies a different understanding of freedom. In the first case, freedom is the acquired, enhanced *capacity to act*. On this point, Romano is correct: there is no need to say that freedom is limited by habit. Habit and freedom coincide. And yet, what does freedom mean in relation to the broader concept of habit? It may consist in a *liberation from* a deep-rooted habitual way of seeing and acting. On the most general level, existence is defined, in Merleau-Ponty, as the movement by which an individual being takes up and transforms by this very movement his or her own situation.³⁴ Even though profoundly shaped by habits, human existence is not bound to be a “walking bundle of habits,” as James once put it.³⁵ If we refer to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of existence, habit and freedom do not coincide, even though they remain inseparable.

NOTES

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, rev. L. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1103b23–25. The complex relation between “habit” (*ethos*) and the state or disposition (*hexis*) in Aristotle constitutes an important part of each exposition of the Aristotelian ethics; for example, see Thornton C. Lockwood,

“Habituation, Habit, and Character in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*,” in *A History of Habit*, ed. Tom Sparrow and Adam Hutchinson (Plymouth, U.K.: Lexington Books), 19–36.

2. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. V. L. Dowdell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 35.
3. William James, *Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), chap. IV.
4. Félix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, trans. C. Carlisle and M. Sinclair (London: Continuum, 2008).
5. Claude Romano, “L’équivoque de l’habitude,” *Revue germanique internationale* 13 (2011): 192.
6. Maine de Biran, *Influence de l’habitude sur la faculté de penser* (Paris: Vrin, 1987).
7. James, *Principles of Psychology*, 125.
8. Paul Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. Erazim V. Kohák, foreword by Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 280.
9. Aristotle, “*Categories*” and “*De Interpretatione*,” trans. J. L. Ackrill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 24.
10. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Emotions: Outline of a Theory*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Carlo, 1993), 53–54.
11. Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature*, 233.
12. *Ibid.*, 328.
13. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 98–99; see also the analysis of the “concrete movement,” 106–9.
14. *Ibid.*, 143.
15. *Ibid.*, 145.
16. Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature*, 292; translation modified. In the original French version, Paul Ricœur writes: “L’habitude est partout une manière d’être acquise, contractée, qui donne pouvoir au vouloir” (*Philosophie de la volonté I: Le volontaire et l’involontaire* [Paris: Aubier, 1950], 276).
17. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 145. See also Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, “Merleau-Ponty. Actions, Habits, and Skilled Expertise,” in *Philosophy of Mind and Phenomenology*, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom, Andreas Elpidorou, and Walter Hopp (London: Routledge, 2016), 98–116, esp. 106.
18. Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature*, 314.
19. Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, 51–53.
20. Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature*, 291: “Aptitude does not create taste.” The English translation was modified, since it wrongly renders “aptitude” as “attitude.” The original text is as follows: “Si donc l’aptitude ne crée pas le goût, la spontanéité pratique de l’habitude implique seulement que le geste usuel ait le seuil d’exécution le plus bas et que la volonté puisse l’ébranler avec une impulsion minime” (Ricœur, *Philosophie de la volonté I*, 275).

21. Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature*, 8.
22. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 146–47. Ricœur writes, in this context, about the “automatization of structure” (*Freedom and Nature*, 298–99).
23. James, *Principles of Psychology*, 126.
24. Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature*, 302. See also James, *Principles of Psychology*, 126.
25. Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature*, 303. This idea of spontaneity does not imply that we are able to start something from the beginning (as in Kant); rather, it suggests that a movement is initiated without any external cause: “Spontaneity is the initiative of movement. Initiative seems evident when movement recommences after having ceased, and in the absence of any external cause. . . . Habit reveals itself as spontaneity in the regularity of the periods” (Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, 35). Ricœur eventually takes a rather hostile attitude to this kind of “automatization in release.” It is a “desertion of consciousness,” a “distraction,” inertia as an “adopted attitude” (Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature*, 304), that is, an attitude we accept. There is no mechanism without a voluntary option to abandon voluntary control (this nearly Sartrean idea is surprising to find in Ricœur). It is a “fall” (into automatism).
26. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. I, *Swann’s Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, D. J. Enright, and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Random House, 1992), 160.
27. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 144–45. See also Bruce Bégout, “Esquisse d’une théorie phénoménologique de l’habitude,” *Alter. Revue de phénoménologie* 12 (2004): 173–90.
28. True, some disagreements remain. Is this “habitual” awareness anonymous or absorbed, that is, without a subjective dimension, as Hubert Dreyfus tries to show when describing it as “absorbed, skillful coping” (“The Current Relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Embodiment,” *Electronic Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 4 [1996], <http://ejap.louisiana.edu/EJAP/1996.spring/dreyfus.1996.spring.html>)? For criticism of this notion of “anonymity,” see Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chap. 3. Moreover, can this habitual awareness, which is mostly practical, prove the primacy of practical attitude over theoretical knowledge, as some pragmatist readers of phenomenology argue?
29. Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature*, 281.
30. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 252.
31. *Ibid.*, 84.
32. Relating habit to the immemorial past raises many questions. Does habit constitute a form of memory, or is it distinct from memory? Does it presuppose a pure passivity as a fundamental experience of habit acquisition? It is not in the scope of this article to consider these questions. See, for example, Edward S. Casey, “Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty,” *Man and World* 17 (1983): 279–97. See also Dermot Moran, “Edmund Husserl’s Phenomenology

of Habituality and Habitus," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 42 (January 2011): 53–77.

33. Alia Al-Saji, "A Phenomenology of Critical-Ethical Vision: Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and the Question of Seeing Differently," *Chiasmi International* 11 (2009): 375–98.

34. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 173.

35. James, *Principles of Psychology*, 130.