

Habit and Attention

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### Introduction

The things we do – our actions – can be contrasted with the things that merely happen to us. The dominant view distinguishes actions from happenings on the grounds that the former are essentially brought about and guided by intentions. Merleau-Ponty offers an alternative account, according to which doings are primarily initiated and guided by the agent's apprehension of her environment. Intentions may still play a role in bringing about action, but they are not essential, and the way they influence behaviour is conceived differently on his view. In this paper, I consider two important factors that contribute to our actions: habit and attention. Surprisingly, these have been largely ignored by proponents of the dominant view, despite their significance for agency. Here, I argue that whilst neither can be satisfactorily accommodated on the dominant model, Merleau-Ponty's framework offers a nice explanation of them. This gives us some reason to prefer a Merleau-Pontyan account to the dominant view. I will begin by outlining the dominant model in more detail. After this, I will present three cases that illustrate the importance of habit and attention, and provide arguments to show that their role in action cannot be adequately explained by the dominant view. I will then present Merleau-Ponty's alternative model, and show how it accounts for the contribution made by attention and habit to

agency.

### The dominant view of action

The dominant view is that actions are essentially brought about and guided by the agent's intentions. Intentions are mental states that represent the agent's performance of action. They are conceived as propositional attitudes. Having an intention involves taking up an action-initiating attitude – Mele (1992) calls this an 'executive' attitude – towards a certain proposition. Theorists usually distinguish intentions that bring about action at some later date, and those that bring about action now. Bratman (1984) calls them 'future-directed' and 'present-directed' intentions, respectively.

There are two variants of the dominant account. The Simple View holds that an act of  $\phi$ -ing is brought about by an intention with the content, 'I  $\phi$ '. The Single Phenomenon View, in contrast, holds that the agent need not have an intention to  $\phi$ ; instead, her act of  $\phi$ -ing may be brought about by intentions with other relevant content – such as intentions that represent the performance of the component actions that constitute  $\phi$ -ing.<sup>1</sup> For some movement to count as an action, it must be brought about by the agent's intentions in the right sort of way, i.e., non-deviantly. Theorists disagree over how this should be cashed out, but the debate need not concern us here. Suffice to say that it rules out cases of the following sort. I have my rifle trained on the prime minister, whom I intend to shoot. I am very nervous and sweating profusely as a result of my plan. My finger slips, my rifle goes off, and a bullet lodges in the prime minister. In this case, my intention to shoot the prime minister brings about my shooting of her. However, the shooting is not an action I perform, but something that happens accidentally. It is not an action because whilst it is brought about by my

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<sup>1</sup> This distinction is due to Bratman (1987).

intention to shoot, my intention does not bring about the shooting in the right way.

There is a further distinction between types of intention that corresponds to the difference between two sorts of explanation one might give of agency. Agency is a personal level phenomenon – only animals, *qua* animals, can be agents. However, there are subpersonal mechanisms that underlie the performance of action. We can therefore distinguish between an explanation of agency, which will be an explanation at the personal level, and an explanation of the mechanisms that underlie agency, which will be an explanation at the subpersonal level. Correspondingly, a distinction is drawn between personal and subpersonal intentions. Personal intentions are the sort of state that may enter into explanations at the personal level. They are, in principle, available to consciousness (even though the subject may not, in fact, be conscious of all of them), and can figure in her practical reasoning. Subpersonal intentions may enter into explanations of the mechanisms that underlie action. They are, in principle, unavailable to consciousness, and are incapable of figuring in the subject's practical deliberations. Instead, they are components of hypothesized subpersonal mechanisms, responsible for executing action. One may hold that actions essentially involve one sort of intention without holding that they essentially involve the other. Thus one may think that personal intentions are essential for agency without supposing that the mechanisms that underlie action involve subpersonal intentions. Conversely, one may hold that subpersonal intentions are essential components of the mechanisms that underlie action without thinking that personal intentions are necessary. I take it that the dominant view of agency is intended to be a personal level explanation of action. It is an account of what agency – a personal level phenomenon – essentially is, rather than an explanation of the mechanisms that underlie it. It follows that we should understand the dominant view as claiming that

actions are essentially brought about by the subject's *personal* intentions, and that this claim is neutral with respect to the question of whether subpersonal intentions are essential for action.

### Habit and attention – problems for the dominant model

I will argue that habit and attention play important roles in action, and that this cannot be properly captured by the dominant model.

I will begin by considering two cases that illustrate the contribution of attention and habit.

- Case 1: suppose that I consciously deliberate about what to do and decide to go for a picnic. I make some sandwiches and set off on my bicycle for the picnic spot. I become distracted thinking about the paper I am writing, and rather than cycling straight up the road to the picnic spot, I turn off and cycle along my habitual route to work. I realise this with some annoyance after a short interval, and turn back.
- Case 2: this case is the same as the first, except that I do not become distracted. I pay attention to what I am doing, and cycle to the picnic spot.

Case 1 illustrates the fact that that an agent's habit of  $\phi$ -ing plays a role in producing her subsequent episodes of  $\phi$ -ing behaviour. It is because I habitually cycle to work a certain way that I set off along this route when I am not paying attention. Case 2 illustrates attention's role in keeping one's actions on track. It is because I am paying attention to what I am doing that I successfully cycle to the picnic spot. My attentiveness blocks the performance of the irrelevant – i.e., unrelated to my current task – habitual action of cycling work-wards. A satisfactory account of agency must be able to capture these facts. I will first discuss how the dominant view might account for habit, before considering the role of attention.

The dominant view claims that every action is essentially brought about by intentions that represent its performance, or the performance of some other relevant action(s) – e.g., actions that are components of the one performed. The dominant view must therefore explain the contribution of habit in these terms.

One acquires the habit of  $\phi$ -ing through repeatedly doing so. To explain the contribution habit makes to action, the dominant account must therefore hold that the past repetition of  $\phi$ -ing behaviour that leads to developing a habit plays some role in producing further intentions to  $\phi$ . One might suppose that there is an obvious way to make sense of this proposal. It is sometimes claimed that to build up a habit is to develop a motor routine, which is a template for performing the behaviour in question. The motor routine can be thought of as including intentions that represent the action's performance, or the performance of other relevant action(s). One might then hold that habitual actions are produced by the activation of this motor routine. In case 1, I develop a motor routine that specifies my cycling a certain route to work. This motor routine is activated, and so I form an intention to cycle to work, which then brings about my behaviour of cycling work-wards.

However, whether or not it is plausible to suppose that acquiring a habit involves developing a motor routine, the dominant account cannot appeal to this analysis to explain the role of habit in agency. The dominant view is an analysis of agency, and as such, it is a personal level explanation of action, which should be read as claiming that actions are essentially initiated by the agent's *personal* intentions. But the most plausible way to understand the analysis suggested above is as a subpersonal explanation of the mechanisms that underlie action. There are different accounts of the personal/subpersonal distinction. Nevertheless, I take it that there is widespread agreement on the following two distinguishing factors. First, subpersonal

explanations make no reference to the person or agent *qua* agent. Second, subpersonal explanations are mechanistic, which means that the processes they posit admit of the sort of regularity that can be captured by causal scientific laws. The explanation of habit suggested above fits this conception of the subpersonal. The activation and running of a motor routine is not something that involves the agent *qua* agent. The motor routine is not something followed, implemented, or developed by the agent herself. Each event in the process is set in motion by the previous event, and it in turn causes the next. It is an impersonal process that merely happens. Motor routines exhibit law-like regularity – a routine produces exactly the same sequence of behaviour every time it is activated. It follows that the intentions supposedly produced as part of motor routines must be conceived as subpersonal. Even if this is a correct account of the mechanisms underlying habitual action, it does nothing to vindicate the dominant view, which claims that all actions are essentially brought about by personal intentions.

The dominant view must hold that habitual actions of  $\phi$ -ing are brought about by personal intentions that represent  $\phi$ -ing, or the performance of other relevant actions. But there are serious difficulties with this proposal that can be brought about by thinking about case 1. On the present proposal, I cycle work-wards in case 1 either because I intend to do so, or I because I intend to perform some other relevant action. However, it is highly implausible to suppose that I have any such intentions. I intend to go for a picnic. This intention cannot give rise to cycling-towards-work behaviour in the non-deviant way required for this behaviour to be construed as an action. One might try to argue that although I start off intending to go for a picnic, I lose this intention and gain intentions that can produce a cycling work-wards action. But this does not fit the facts of the case. I am annoyed when I notice that I am no longer

cycling to the picnic spot, and am instead cycling towards work. The reason for my annoyance is surely that I still intend to go for a picnic. Moreover, although there are cases that we would ordinarily describe as one intention being replaced with another, these are cases where the agent changes her mind. My cycling towards work in case 1 is not the result of my having changed my mind about what to do. Alternatively, one might hold that I do not lose my picnicking intention. Instead, I have conflicting intentions – a picnicking intention and intentions that can produce cycling work-wards. However, this will not do either. People do sometimes have conflicting intentions. But these are either cases where the agent consciously desires conflicting things and is pulled in two different directions, or where she has simply failed to realise that her intentions are incompatible. The case where I absentmindedly begin cycling to work is not like this. I do not desire to do anything relevant to cycling work-wards. Neither have I simply failed to realise that I cannot both cycle to work and go to the picnic spot at the same time. Furthermore, the appeal to habit in case 1 is supposed to explain why I begin cycling work-wards, even though I intend to go for a picnic. In other words, the explanation holds that my habit produces my action *in the absence of any relevant intentions*. It follows that it is implausible to suppose that my intentions initiate and guide my habitual action of cycling work-wards in case 1. Thus there are some cases of habitual action that are not brought about by the agent's intentions.

One option available to the dominant model at this point is to deny that unintended habitual behaviour, such as my cycling work-wards in case 1, counts as action. However, it seems we should reject this claim. The concept of action is connected with the concept of responsibility. The exact relation between these two notions is complex, but in general, one is responsible for those things one does, or

those things one has a hand in bringing about. Intuitively, I am responsible for my cycling work-wards. We can see this by considering the situations in which I am blameworthy. Suppose, e.g., that in turning down the road towards work, I knock over a small child. I am worthy of blame. Similarly, if I am late to meet my friend at the picnic spot because I cycled work-wards, she would be justified in being annoyed with me. In both cases, the fact that I can be blamed for my behaviour shows that I am responsible for it, and the fact that I am responsible for my cycling work-wards in turn strongly suggests that it is an action.

Moreover, I take it that an important difference between an agent's *actions* and those things that merely happen to her, is that the agent has direct control over the former. (Indeed, it is the fact that she has direct control over her actions that confers responsibility for them on the agent, since one can only be responsible for those things one has the power to change.) Her control is *direct* insofar as she does not exercise it by first doing something else. We can contrast cases of direct control with those where control is mediated. For example, I have a certain amount of control over my brother's driving in that if I ask him to drive me to the dentist, he will take me there. But my control over his driving is indirect, since it is mediated by my requests. In my own case, however, I do not need to ask myself in order to drive myself to the dentist. I can simply drive myself to where I want to go. In this way, my control over my driving is direct. The agent has control over at least some of her unintended habitual behaviour in that she can intervene in it, changing its course, or bringing it to a halt. The control she has is direct because she does not need to do anything else in order to intervene in her activity. As Pollard notes, '[b]y an act of will, one can stop oneself from exercising a given habit... merely by paying attention to what one is doing' (Pollard 2006: 59). This is what happens in case 1, where I realise with annoyance



that I am cycling work-wards, and by paying attention to my behaviour, I intervene in it, turning round and cycling back towards the picnic spot. The fact that I can directly intervene in my unintended cycling work-wards means that it is an action. It follows that there are at least some instances of unintended habitual behaviour that we should class as actions. These actions cannot be accommodated on the dominant view of agency.<sup>2</sup>

The dominant view also faces problems in accounting for the role of attention in action. There seem to be two options for understanding attention's role in the production of action. These are not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, one might think that to pay attention to what I am doing is to keep my intended course of action before my mind. One might then take this to consist in my intention's occupying my mind, i.e., my having a conscious intention. It follows that a way to try and accommodate the role of attention on the dominant account is to claim that intentions only have the power to produce action when they are conscious. On this proposal, my picnicking intention must be conscious to produce action. When my attention is occupied by other things in case 1 and the intention becomes unconscious, it loses its action-initiating power. But there are problems with this suggestion. For one thing, it's not clear that conscious intentions *do* have greater power to initiate and control action. It is commonly accepted that people may have suppressed mental states that manifest themselves in their behaviour. The subject has no knowledge of her suppressed states, and will often sincerely avow the contrary. Since the dominant account takes all action to be brought about by intention, it must hold that a suppressed state manifests in the subject's behaviour by giving rise to corresponding

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<sup>2</sup> See also, Rietveld's discussion in this volume, which explores in some detail, the sort of freedom that is involved in our unreflective actions.

intentions. My suppressed love for Archibald, e.g., leads to my constantly visiting his house and spending an improper amount of time with him. On the dominant view, this behaviour must result from relevant intentions. However, as the subject avows the contrary of her suppressed state, she may well have conflicting conscious intentions. I may sincerely avow that I do not love Archibald, and consciously intend to only spend a socially acceptable amount of time with him. But these conscious intentions do not prevent the manifestation of the suppressed state. I continue to spend an improper amount of time visiting Archibald. In such a case, the subject's unconscious intentions have greater power to initiate and control her actions than her conscious intentions.

Furthermore, on the present proposal, the attentiveness that enables me to successfully cycle to the picnic spot consists in my consciously thinking about what I am doing. But there are other cases that are at odds with this understanding of attention. I have in mind, the exercise of certain sorts of expertise. Here is one example:

- Case 3: Joan is an expert baseball player. When playing to the best of her ability, she enters a state that has been called 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 1988). This state is partly characterised by 'intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment' (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 90). I take this to mean that for Joan to play to the best of her ability, her attention must be focused on what she is doing (although it does not follow that simply paying attention to the game is sufficient to enter a state of flow).<sup>3</sup> However, if she starts to consciously *think* about where and how to hit the ball, or what her opponent and team-mates are doing, this disrupts her playing.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> My description of Joan's expert activity should not be taken to imply that *all* expert

In a case such as 3, the agent's attentiveness plays a role in bringing about and controlling her activity. Conscious thought – having thoughts occupy one's mind – gets in the way of her performance. It is thus plausible to think that having a conscious intention – having *this* thought occupy one's mind – will similarly disrupt performance. It follows that the agent's attentiveness cannot consist in her having conscious intentions. Moreover, attention's role in this case seems to be the same as its role in case 2. In both, paying attention to what one is doing keeps one's activity on track. This suggests that my attentiveness in case 2 does not consist in my having a conscious intention. We should reject the analysis of attention as awareness of one's intentions.

The second way to understand attention is as a perceptual phenomenon. On this understanding, paying attention makes a difference to my perceptual experience, and it is this difference that accounts for the difference in my behaviour. Intuitively, paying attention allows one to gather the information about the world and one's orientation with respect to it that is required for successful performance of the relevant action. However, it is clear that the difference between paying attention and being inattentive is not the difference between perceiving and not perceiving. It is common to distinguish between background and focal modes of perceptual awareness. One is

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activity is characterised by flow, or requires attention.

<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon is well-documented. For example, cricketer Ken Barrington describes loss of form as follows: '*Everything* went wrong with my batting... You can't change a habit instinctively. When you're playing well you don't think about *anything* and run-making comes naturally. When you're out of form you're conscious of needing to do things right, so you have to think first and act second. To make runs under those conditions is mighty difficult' (Barrington 1968: 97f).

focally aware of something when it is the focus of one's attention. One has background awareness of the things in one's visual field when one is not paying attention to them. It follows that my inattentiveness in case 1 does not mean that I receive *no* perceptual information about the world and my orientation. Indeed, my inattentiveness in case 1 results in my cycling work-wards. To perform this action, I must perceive the turning to work, my bike, and its relation to my body. Thus I must still perceive these things, even though I am not paying attention.

Instead, one might think that paying attention allows the subject to gather *salient* information. According to this suggestion, my inattentiveness in case 1 means that I do not gather information about the route to the picnic spot. Instead, I gather information about the route to work. By paying attention in case 2, I prevent the gathering of information about the way to work, and gather information relevant to picnicking. There is something right about this suggestion, and I will examine it in more detail below. But notice that it cannot be developed on the dominant account. The problem is that doing so requires an explanation of why my habit of cycling a certain route to work every day results in my gathering information relevant to this activity when I am not paying attention in case 1. The dominant view cannot explain this because it cannot account for habit.

This is perhaps the central problem the dominant view faces in trying to accommodate the role of attention in action. Paying attention to what one is doing keeps one's activity on track. Case 2 is an example of this. It is because I am paying attention to what I am doing in case 2 that I stay on course for the picnic spot, rather than take the turning for work. My attentiveness blocks the performance of the irrelevant habitual action. Since the dominant account cannot explain how my habitual action in case 1 is produced, it cannot explain how my paying attention in

case 2 prevents its production.

### Merleau-Ponty's account of action

In this section, I will present Merleau-Ponty's alternative account of agency.

On Merleau-Ponty's view of action, an agent's doings are initiated and guided by the way in which she apprehends her environment, without the need for any intervening mental states that represent her performance of action (such as intentions). The fundamental way in which the agent apprehends her environment is perceptual, and her perceived environment is able to bring about action without the need for any thought. It is clear from this that his view of action goes hand-in-hand with an account of what it is to perceive. Merleau-Ponty holds that agents do not perceive the world 'neutrally' as possessing merely 'objective' properties such as size and shape. Instead, an agent perceives the world as having a value for her in terms of her capacities for action. She perceives her environment as 'requiring' or 'demanding' or being 'appropriate for' certain actions. Thus she perceives lasagne as for-eating, tennis balls as for-throwing, and ladders as offering an opportunity to climb. The values for action that the agent perceives are sometimes called 'affordances' (Gibson 1977).

The agent perceives these opportunities for action as differing in their 'attractive power', which varies with their saliency. One might say that she perceives her environment as *demanding* that she perform certain actions, whilst merely *suggesting* that she perform others. Some of the things I *could* do in my environment may have so little saliency for me I will not perceive them as opportunities for action at all. Various factors affect the saliency of perceived affordances. These include (but are not restricted to) the agent's current task, her emotional state, and her desires.

For example, the faulty brake cable solicits me to mend it more strongly when I am actually engaged in the task of servicing my bike. When I feel bored of working, the television draws me to turn it on. My desire for a new pair of roller skates makes the roller skate shop stand out for me as offering an opportunity to buy some. There are also some things that one cannot help but perceive as demanding urgent action, no matter what one is doing. A charging bull, e.g., will always be perceived as urgently demanding that one avoid it. We might say that a demand like this is always salient for the agent, given that her nature as an embodied creature continually imposes the task of surviving on her. The agent may sometimes be solicited by conflicting affordances. For example, an agent about to perform a bungee jump may both perceive the drop as demanding that she move away from it, whilst simultaneously inviting her to jump.

Merleau-Ponty holds that the perceived opportunities to act can draw forth the agent's behaviour without the need for any intervening mental states that represent its performance. Her action will be initiated and controlled by the affordances with the strongest 'attractive power'. This is made possible by the possession of motor skills and habits. Motor skills are physical abilities, which range from very simple abilities such as being able to scratch one's foot, through to more complex capacities like the ability to play the clarinet. Motor skills are acquired through practice, which is a process of the body becoming familiar with the activity, until engaging in it feels like 'second nature'. Motor skills are twofold abilities. When one develops a motor skill, one acquires a pattern of behaviour. But one also acquires a capacity to perceive appropriate environments as offering opportunities to engage in that behaviour. Thus when I learn to surf, e.g., I learn to move my balance on the surfboard and steer it with my legs to position myself on the crest of a wave, and I learn to perceive certain

waves as offering me opportunities to ride them, and others as ‘prohibiting’ surfing by being too big or small. On Merleau-Ponty’s account, once one has acquired a motor skill, one can perceive opportunities to engage in the relevant form of behaviour, and then immediately respond to this perception by acting, without the need for any intervening mental states that represent one engaging in that activity.

It is clear that the agent’s thoughts – including her intentions – sometimes play a role in bringing about her actions. Merleau-Ponty does not offer any detailed analysis of thought’s role in action, but his account can be developed to accommodate the role of thought in the following way. Thought brings about action by affecting the way the agent apprehends her environment. There are many ways that thought may do this. First, we saw above that the affordances the agent perceives differ in their ‘attractive power’, which varies with their saliency. A number of factors can affect the saliency of an affordance. These include the agent’s thoughts. For example, the agent’s current task or project affects the saliency of affordances. In at least some cases, the agent takes on a project or task by deciding or forming the intention to do so. A decision/intention to engage in some particular project is a thought. In this way, the agent’s decisions/intentions influence which opportunities for action are salient for her, and so which affordances draw forth action. Similarly, the agent’s desires affect the saliency of affordances – those things she desires or which are relevant to her desires, will be salient for her. Thus her desires affect how strongly an affordance solicits the agent, and so whether it draws forth action.

Thought can also affect the agent’s perceived environment by adding merely imaginary entities to her surroundings, which then affect the opportunities for action the agent perceives her environment as offering. The suggestion is *not* that the agent perceives what she imagines. To do so would be to have some kind of hallucination.

Instead, the claim is that by imagining that one's surroundings contain certain non-existent entities, one influences the possibilities one perceives one's real surroundings as offering. Consider this case. Adrian is playing with his young daughter Bella. Bella has an imaginary friend called Chris. They are having a tea party. Adrian and Bella pretend that Chris is sitting on one of the seats. Bella decides that teddy will join them. Adrian looks for a spare chair and adds it to the table. Adrian does not use the chair that he pretends Chris is using. The rival account of action can analyse this case in the following way. Adrian imagines that Chris is sitting on a particular seat. His imagining changes the field of affordances that he perceives. When Adrian looks for an empty chair for teddy, he perceives Chris' chair as empty – he sees that no-one is really sitting on it – but he does not perceive it as appropriate for seating teddy. He does not perceive it as inviting him to seat teddy on it because Adrian *imagines* that it is occupied by Chris. Instead, a spare chair in the corner stands out as salient for seating teddy. Adrian's perception of the spare chair as affording teddy-seating draws him to add it to the table. In this way, Adrian's imagining affects the opportunities he perceives his environment as offering, and so his imagining influences his behaviour. Insofar as imaginings can be classed as a type of thought, this is another way that thought can bring about action on the rival view.

A third way that thought can affect the agent's apprehension of her environment is by adding a further layer of significance to her perceived surroundings. On the rival model of action, this accounts for *some* cases of acquiring a new skill. Once one possesses a skill, one is able to perceive appropriate parts of the world as offering one the opportunity to engage in the relevant sort of behaviour. Perception of these opportunities to act then draws forth one's actions. Prior to acquiring the skill, however, one does not perceive appropriate environments as



offering the opportunity to act. One might thus wonder how one does something for the first time, and so begins to acquire a skill on Merleau-Ponty's account. In some cases, this is explained by our capacity to copy another person, which is arguably something that does not require thought. (Very young children can imitate adults before they are capable of thinking.) But one does not always learn a new skill by copying someone else. Moreover, it is undoubtedly the case that we sometimes learn new skills by consciously thinking about what to do. When I first learn to drive, e.g., I have to think about the pedals and what they do. I perceive the pedals as for-pressing. But I do not yet perceive one as for-braking, one as for-accelerating, and one as for-changing-gear. The rival account of action can hold that I represent the pedals' functions in thought. My thought about what the pedals do adds an extra layer of significance to them. Their value for my actions does not just consist in their perceived value as for-pressing; it also includes their mentally represented value – the way that I *think* about them. The combination of the pedals' perceived values and the values I give to them in thought calls forth my actions of pushing the pedals in appropriate situations. Again, my thought influences my actions by affecting the way in which I apprehend my environment.<sup>5</sup>

#### Habit and attention on Merleau-Ponty's account

The Merleau-Pontyan account presented above offers a nice explanation of the role of habit and attention in agency.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) places habits in the same category as motor skills.

Indeed, what later writers such as Dreyfus (2000) call 'motor skills', he simply refers

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<sup>5</sup> See Romdenh-Romluc (2012) for a more detailed account of thought's role in action.

to as 'habits'. It is easy to see why. A motor skill is the capacity to engage with the world in a certain way. It is a particular sort of behaviour that can only be produced in environments of the appropriate sort. Motor skills are acquired through practice, which is a matter of the body's familiarising itself with the behaviour in question. Habits are likewise forms of behaviour that one produces in certain situations. My habit of cycling to work a certain way each day, e.g., is a particular sort of behaviour that I produce in a particular part of the world – my usual route to work. Like motor skills, one acquires a habit by repeatedly doing something in the same way – one's habits just are one's usual patterns of behaviour. Since habits fall into the same category as motor skills, Merleau-Ponty can analyse both in the same way. As we saw above, he holds that motor skills are twofold capacities to both perform certain actions and to perceive relevant parts of the world as affording that behaviour. Once one has acquired a motor skill, one can perceive opportunities to exercise it, and then respond to that perception by acting, without the need for thought. Similarly, when one develops a habit, one both acquires a pattern of behaviour, and a way of perceiving the world – one comes to perceive relevant parts of the world as offering opportunities to perform the habitual actions. Moreover, one can immediately respond to these perceived affordances by performing the actions they invite, without thinking about what one is doing. Thus once I have developed the habit of cycling a certain way to work every day, I come to see that route as soliciting me to take it, and I can immediately respond to this solicitation by cycling along that route, without the need for any intervening thought that represents my cycling (or any other relevant actions).

Whilst Merleau-Ponty categorises habits and motor skills together, in ordinary talk we usually distinguish between them. We might ordinarily say, e.g., that I am

skilled at knitting, but not in the habit of doing it because I do not knit very frequently. Merleau-Ponty accommodates this ordinary distinction between skills and habits, even though he places them in the same category. Moreover, this plays an important role in his analysis of habitual action. He thinks of skills and habits as lying on a spectrum. Habits are more frequently repeated patterns of activity. Thus, e.g., I have knitted a sufficient number of times to be a skilled knitter, but I do not knit enough to be in the habit of knitting. On Merleau-Ponty's account, the more one does something, the more vividly opportunities to do that thing will show up for one. It follows that we should expect the affordances related to what we would ordinarily call an agent's habits to show up quite strongly for the agent. What this means, in other words, is that the agent's habits tend to make certain possibilities for action stand out as salient for her – those involved in the habitual behaviour. My habit of eating an apple for breakfast every morning, e.g., means that the apples in my fruit bowl solicit me to eat them more strongly than if I was merely an occasional apple-eater. The claim that my habits *tend* to make possibilities to engage in habitual behaviour salient for me does not mean that I *always* perceive those opportunities as salient. Instead, it means that my habits will be one of the factors that contribute to salience. This provides a way to understand the difference between intended and unintended habitual behaviour. Habitual action will be intended where the affordances made salient by that habit correspond to those made salient by the agent's current task. A habitual action will be *unintended* where the affordances that bring it about do *not* correspond to those made salient by the agent's current task.

One might raise the following objection at this point. I argued above that a satisfactory account of agency must provide a personal level analysis of habitual behaviour. However, it seems that Merleau-Ponty has not done this. He takes

unintended habitual actions to be unthinking responses to the agent's environment. He thus appears to conceive of them as caused by environmental stimuli in a way that does not involve the agent *qua* agent, and which can be adequately described by scientific laws. It follows that his explanation of habitual behaviour is subpersonal.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) offers the following response. First, his account acknowledges and accommodates the fact that habitual behaviour does not admit of the kind of regularity that would allow it to be captured by scientific laws. Consider, e.g., someone who, unlike me, is in the habit of knitting each evening. Although his habit involves a repeated pattern of activity, it will nevertheless exhibit considerable variation, i.e., irregularity. The agent may be knitting a jumper. One evening he may knit a sleeve. The next evening he may knit part of the back. The sleeve may be knitted in stocking stitch, whilst the back incorporates a cable pattern. Similar points apply in the case of my habit of cycling to work. Whilst one may initially suppose that my behaviour is regular, there is, on closer inspection, much variation in my cycling, even though I cycle the same way each day. Some days the path will be dry, other days I will be wet. Sometimes I will have to navigate through a crowd of schoolchildren. On other days, there will be no-one about. Sometimes I will cycle to work carrying a large bag of books. Other days I will carry a picnic. It follows that no two manifestations of this habit will be exactly the same. The variations in the instances of habitual behaviour defy a causal, mechanistic description. But they can be accommodated on Merleau-Ponty's account of habitual actions as drawn forth by the agent's apprehension of her environment, because this model does not require the agent's responses to her surroundings to be regular.

One might object that these variations could be merely perceived, which is consistent with habitual behaviour actually being regular in a way that allows for

causal analysis.<sup>6</sup> However, there are different ways to interpret this objection. On one reading, the objection claims that the appearance of irregularity is an illusion. Whilst it may seem that, e.g., knitting a sleeve in stocking stitch involves different physical movements from knitting a back piece that incorporates a cable pattern, we are deceived about this. Understood in this way, the objection is a sceptical worry about the reliability of our perceptual experience. Such sceptical worries may or may not be legitimate. But since they are not specific difficulties faced by the Merleau-Pontyan account of action offered here, I set them aside. A second way to understand the objection is as the claim that whilst habitual behaviour appears irregular to our human senses, there is regularity at the level of neurophysiological processes, which are thus amenable to causal analysis. However, this possibility is consistent with the claim that habitual behaviour does not exhibit law-like regularity. I have taken it for granted here that human agency is a personal level phenomenon, and as such, a proper explanation of it should be non-mechanistic, whilst at the same time, our actions are underpinned by subpersonal processes that can be explained causally. Insofar as habitual behaviour is a type of human action, it follows that we should describe it as a personal level phenomenon, whilst taking it to be underpinned by causal processes at the subpersonal level. Neurophysiological goings-on are subpersonal, and so we should *expect* them – including those that underpin habitual behaviour – to exhibit law-like regularity. But it is hopefully now clear that this is consistent with also claiming that habitual behaviour – understood as a personal level phenomenon – is *irregular*.

There is a second reason why Merleau-Ponty's analysis of habit is non-causal and thus a personal level explanation of the phenomenon. Mechanistic causal processes involve the brute, physical characteristics of the entities/events that partake

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<sup>6</sup> Thank you to an anonymous referee for raising this worry.

in them. But although habitual actions, on Merleau-Ponty's account, are responses to the agent's physical environment, they are not responses to it *per se*. Instead, they are responses to the agent's physical environment *apprehended in a certain manner* – where this can include the way she perceives it, and the way she represents it in thought. Notice that this is so, even if one takes affordances to be objective properties of the physical environment. The agent does not respond to the affordances *per se*. Indeed, this would be impossible, since any environment will afford a huge number of actions to the agent, some of which will be inconsistent (e.g., a bed affords both sleeping and using as a trampoline, but one cannot do both at the same time). The agent responds to those affordances that stand out for her as most salient. In other words, what is important for the Merleau-Pontyan analysis of habitual behaviour I have offered here is the *meaning* that those affordances have for the agent. Action is not a response to the mere physical elements of the agent's surroundings; but to her environment considered in terms of the meaning it has for her. But this is not something that can be captured using a causal analysis.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the fact that habitual actions are a response to the agent's perception of her environment also points to the way in which habitual behaviour involves the agent *qua* agent, on Merleau-Ponty's account. Perception is a personal level state. It is the *agent* – rather than some subsystem of the agent – who perceives her surroundings. Moreover, the agent's perception of her environment reflects what is salient for her, given her tasks, desires, and so on – i.e., it reflects what is salient for her *qua* agent. One might object that since many habitual actions are *unthinking* responses to the agent's apprehended environment, they cannot be considered responses of the agent *qua* agent. Instead they must be thought of as the responses of

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Rasmus Thybo Jensen for helping me to develop this point.

the agent's subpersonal systems. Only thinking responses can be those of the agent as such.<sup>8</sup> But actions are responses of the agent *qua* agent. (Although, not all of the agent's responses will count as actions.) The objection therefore implies that a response will only count as an action if it is a thinking response. In other words, it implies that actions essentially involve thought. But this is exactly the claim that I have argued against in this paper. As I have shown, we should reject this view. It follows that the objection should also be rejected. Merleau-Ponty's conception of habitual behaviour construes it as involving the agent *qua* agent. It is a properly personal level account of habitual action.

We saw above that some actions are performed attentively. In these cases, the agent performs the action whilst focusing her attention on what she is doing. Moreover, we think that her attentiveness plays some role in producing her action. I argued above that paying attention to what one is doing does not consist in consciously thinking about it. Whilst it is correct to think that one's attentiveness allows one to gather salient perceptual information so that one may complete this task, this thought must be developed to produce an adequate analysis of attention's role in producing certain actions. So what is it to pay attention to what one is doing? Merleau-Ponty does not discuss this phenomenon in any detail, but his account provides the resources to provide the following analysis. Paying attention to what one is doing should be thought of as a sort of 'centring oneself in one's activity', where this can be understood as becoming attuned to those possibilities for action that are relevant to the completion of one's task, so that they stand out as salient for one. 'Centring oneself in one's activity' also sustains this attunement by reducing one's propensity to be distracted.

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<sup>8</sup> Thank you to an anonymous referee for this objection.

Distraction makes possibilities for action that are not relevant to one's current task stand out as salient. There are various ways in which this can happen. Here are just two examples. Recall that the agent's thoughts affect the salience of affordances, and so how strongly those possibilities solicit the agent. My desire to buy a new coat, e.g., makes coat-buying opportunities stand out as salient for me. It follows that distracting thoughts – those that arise and have no connection with the agent's current task – will influence the pattern of salience in the field of possibilities facing the agent. If my desire to buy a new coat arises when I am walking my dog, it will make an opportunity for coat-buying stand out as salient for me, even though I am engaged in a different task – dog-walking. The second example concerns habit. We saw above that the agent's habits tend to make certain possibilities for action stand out as salient for her – those involved in the habitual behaviour. One's habits are one of the things that affect salience. When I am distracted, I am no longer centred in my task. In other words, I am no longer attuned to those possibilities for action that relate to my current activity, so they no longer stand out as salient for me. My lack of attunement to my task means that my habits can take over in determining what is salient for me, and so I start to see opportunities to engage in habitual behaviour as salient.

We can now see the role played by attention in action on the Merleau-Pontyan account we are developing. Paying attention to what one is doing allows possibilities for action that relate to one's task to stand out as salient, and to continue to stand out as salient. The agent's actions are drawn forth by her apprehension of affordances. Those with the strongest 'attractive power' – i.e., the ones she experiences as most salient – will be the ones that bring about her actions. Where these are the possibilities made salient and sustained as salient by attention, the agent's



attentiveness plays a role in bringing about her behaviour. This is not to say that attention is *always* required to keep one's activity on track. In cases where completing one's task involves habitual behaviour, e.g., the affordances made salient by one's intentions will coincide with those made salient by one's habits. Forming the intention to now  $\phi$  makes those affordances stand out as salient. But once this pattern of salience has been instituted by the agent's intention, it can be sustained by the habits with which it is also associated, allowing the agent to direct her attention elsewhere.

The Merleau-Pontyan account provides the following explanation of the three cases discussed above. In case 1, I consciously deliberate about what to do, and decide to go for a picnic. I set off, but become distracted thinking about my paper, and absentmindedly turn off and start cycling along my usual route to work. We think that I start cycling towards work because I habitually cycle this way. Case 2 is the same as the first, except that I pay attention to what I am doing, and so continue towards the picnic spot. We think in this case my attentiveness plays a role in my action – it blocks habit. When I am paying attention to what I am doing in case 2, I am attuned to those possibilities for action that are relevant to my plan of going for a picnic. Those possibilities stand out as salient for me, and as such, they draw forth my actions. Thus when I am paying attention, the route to the picnic spot stands out for me as the right way to go. It solicits me to cycle along it, and I immediately respond to this solicitation by acting. However, when I am distracted in case 1, I am no longer attuned to those possibilities for action that are relevant to picnicking, and so the route to the picnic spot no longer stands out as salient for me. Moreover, the fact that I habitually cycle towards work a certain way means that I tend to see the route to work as salient – I tend to see it as the right way to go. The fact that I am distracted allows this habit to take over in determining what is salient for me. I thus

see the route to work as the way to go, and this perception of it draws me to cycle along it.

The final case is that of the baseball player, who must pay attention to what she is doing to play to the best of her ability. However, thinking about what she is doing gets in the way of her doing it. By paying attention, the agent is attuned to her activity of baseball playing, so that opportunities to act in relation to this task stand out as salient to her. Paying attention also reduces her propensity for distraction so that these opportunities continue to stand out as salient for her. These perceived affordances then bring about her actions. Thinking disrupts the flow of her behaviour by getting in the way of her ability to discern and then respond to the opportunities for action afforded by the game. As we saw above, it is not only perceived affordances that bring about an agent's activity. Thought can also play a role. One way it does this is by adding extra value for action to the agent's surroundings. She conceptually represents them as requiring certain actions, and then responds by acting accordingly. It is plausible to suppose that conceptually represented requirements for action are more coarsely-grained than perceived affordances – most theorists accept that perception's content is more finely grained than what can be represented in thought.<sup>9</sup> Thus in some – but not all – cases where one's behaviour is guided by conceptually represented requirements for action, it will be less accomplished. If the player starts to think about what she is doing, she effectively replaces perceived requirements for action with conceptually represented ones. Since these are much cruder, her behaviour will be correspondingly less successful than when it is brought about by perceived affordances.

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<sup>9</sup> There are some, however, who dispute this – e.g., McDowell (1994).

## Conclusion

The literature on action is dominated by the view that actions are essentially brought about by intentions. Merleau-Ponty offers an alternative model, according to which actions are initiated and controlled by the way in which the agent apprehends her environment. The agent's apprehension of her environment is primarily perceptual, but it can also incorporate thought about it. In this paper, I have argued that the dominant view cannot adequately explain how habits and attention contribute to agency. But Merleau-Ponty's account offers a nice explanation of these phenomena. This gives us some reason to prefer his view to the dominant account. I thus hope to have established that a Merleau-Pontyan analysis of agency is a promising line of inquiry, and so worthy of further consideration.

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