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Creatures of habit: The problem and the practice of liberation

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Abstract. This paper begins by reflecting on the concept of habit and discussing its significance in various philosophical and non-philosophical contexts – for this helps to clarify the connections between habit and selfhood. I then attempt to sketch an account of the self as "nothing but habit," and to address the questions this raises about how such a self must be constituted. Finally, I focus on the issue of freedom, or liberation, and consider the possibility of moving beyond habit. I emphasize the body since it is through the body that the un-doing of habit must take place. Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty are distinguished from the many philosophers who have recognized the importance of habit by their more radical claim that we not only have habits, but are habits – and for this reason I draw on their work in the first two sections of this paper.

"There is no more striking answer to the problem of the self," suggests Gilles Deleuze, than that "we are habits, nothing but habits."[1] However, if we pursue this idea and attempt to construct an interpretation of selfhood in terms of habit, we find ourselves posing more questions, more 'problems' of the self. Deleuze is right insofar as the concept of habit helps us to understand personal identity, and in particular its continuity and stability through time, but this requires us to articulate how a being must be constituted in order to be capable of habit. More difficult still are questions concerning originality, creativity and change – for these appear to be the opposite, the 'other' of habit. If the self is *only* a habit, how is freedom possible? Regarding the self as a creature of habit brings into focus problems – both metaphysical and practical – that are fundamental to the task of living an ethical or spiritual life. Here, I would like to consider how this interpretation of selfhood brings an illuminating philosophical perspective to the religious ideas of liberation and transcendence, and to the plurality of religious teachings about how these ideas, or ideals, can be realized.

First, though, we must elucidate an account of the relation between selfhood and habit that is clearer and more thorough than Deleuze's condensed, rather sketchy analysis. We may take as our starting-point Maurice Merleau-Ponty's assertion that "my own body is my basic habit. . . the one that conditions all the others, and by means of which they are mutually comprehensible."[2] Just as he regards the body as always 'mine', always connected in some way to a sense of self, Merleau-Ponty regards the self as always embodied – as *in each case* and *at every moment* living, breathing, feeling, suffering (being affected),

changing and decaying. Whilst religious teachings have always addressed this embodied, living-and-dying self, philosophers have often failed to take the body seriously, regarding it as secondary or accidental to the intellectual, spiritual faculties that constitute the individual's mind or soul. As Merleau-Ponty recognizes, the concept of habit allows us to approach the self in its irreducible and ubiquitous 'lived body'. My primary concern is not to explicate Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment, nor to challenge it, but rather to draw inspiration from his emphasis on habit in order to outline an interpretation of selfhood which certainly shares his concern to overcome the dualistic tendency and the rationalist bias of so many philosophies of human nature.

This paper begins by reflecting on the concept of habit and discussing its significance in various philosophical and non-philosophical contexts – for this helps to clarify the connections between habit and selfhood. I will then attempt to sketch an account of the self as "nothing but habit," and to address the questions this raises about how such a self must be constituted. Finally, I will focus on the issue of freedom, or liberation, and consider the possibility – and perhaps the paradox – of moving beyond habit. My emphasis on the body remains important here, for since "my own body is my basic habit" it is through this body that the overcoming or un-doing of habit must take place. Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty are distinguished from the many philosophers who have recognized the importance of habit by their more radical claim that we not only *have* habits, but *are* habits – and for this reason I will draw on their work in particular, at least in the first two sections of the paper.

1. The concept of habit

Merleau-Ponty is not the first philosopher to use the familiar and apparently simple notion of habit to account for some more complex aspect of human existence. Aristotle, and later Aquinas, emphasize the importance of habit from the point of view of morality: both regard ethical life as consisting in the cultivation of good habits, or virtues, and the elimination of bad habits, or vices. "Moral goodness is the child of habit," writes Aristotle, for "the moral virtues we acquire by first exercising them."[3] David Hume, on the other hand, uses the concept of habit in an epistemological context, arguing that "habit or custom" is the foundation of all our judgments, and using this principle to offer a naturalistic account of human understanding.[4] In each of these cases, the role of habit is emphasized in opposition to a kind of dualistic rationalism – Aristotle against Plato, Hume against Descartes – and Merleau-Ponty's invocation of the concept of habit is similarly rooted in a critique of the Cartesian view of the self.[5]

Perhaps because we all recognize the notion of habit, and moreover have first-hand experience of at least some of its effects, these philosophers make use of the concept without reflecting on it thoroughly.[6] However, the meaning of habit is by no means self-evident. As well as functioning philosophically in various contexts, the concept of habit has several different, although related, uses in everyday language. Merleau-Ponty's statement that "my own body is my basic habit" is, in fact, more puzzling than illuminating, since it prompts the question 'what, then, is habit?'

Probably we are most familiar with the notion of habit as "a settled disposition or tendency to act in a certain way, especially one acquired by frequent repetition of the same act until it becomes almost or quite involuntary."[7] This definition captures two key moments of the concept of habit – action and repetition – and indicates that habit in this sense is, curiously, at once a source and a result of action. (Action here includes mental and vocal as well as physical acts.) In other words, the phenomenon of habit testifies to the power of action not merely to produce an effect, but to generate and to form subsequent actions from the same source. This gives a preliminary glimpse of the temporality of habit: repetition, after all, implies time.

As well as this stable "tendency to act," which could be regarded as a psychological disposition, habit signifies an individual's outward appearance, demeanor, posture, bodily condition or constitution: in general, the way in which one holds oneself. As an extension of this, it can refer to a mode of dress and a place of dwelling – a habitat. Habit is also a botanical term, meaning the shape that a particular species grows into (such as shooting upward or creeping along the ground, so that one might speak of 'a shrub of spreading habit'); similarly, mineralogists record the habits of crystals. These more external, physical senses of habit emphasize the notion of shape or form. Joined with the moments of action and repetition, this form should be understood dynamically, as a process of formation – and this, of course, applies to the psychological phenomenon of habit too.

As these different usages of 'habit' suggest, the scope of the concept is extensive. It can refer not only to both the psychological and physical aspects of a human being, but to other animals and to plants. It may even be extended to inorganic things – in his discussion of habit as a principle of human nature, William James remarks on the way in which a garment comes to assume the shape of its wearer, or a key comes to fit its lock more easily after repeated use, and suggests that habit is a basic principle of matter:

> The moment one has to define what habit is, one is led to the fundamental properties of matter. The laws of Nature are nothing but the immutable habits which the different elementary sorts of matter follow in their actions and reactions upon each other.[8]

Habit can account for the shaping of the cultural as well as the natural world, for traditions, customs, myths, rituals and routines are created and maintained by repetition. One of the great strengths of the concept of habit, from a philosophical point of view, is its movement across, and consequent unsettling of, divisions between mind and body, nature and culture, the individual and the social. The boundary between nature and culture, for example, is destabilized by what Deleuze describes as "the paradox of habit... that it is formed by degrees and also that it is a principle of human nature."[9]

None of the senses of habit mentioned so far are adequate to justify the equivalence between 'my own body' and 'my basic habit' suggested by Merleau-Ponty. Taken together, however, they present us with the three moments of action, repetition and formation as a basic structure of the concept of habit, upon which we may develop an interpretation of selfhood. As it happens, the etymology of the word 'habit' reveals a closer approximation to the phenomenological sense of self expressed by the phrase 'my own body'. 'Habit' is derived from the Latin *habere*, which means to have or to hold, and this core notion of having and holding has connotations of possession and belonging. Our habitat is the place to which we belong, and in which we keep our belongings. 'The way in which one has or holds oneself' is at once a rather vague and the most precise definition of habit, and at least in the present context it is of central importance. It conveys the sense of attachment engendered by habit (manifested in its most extreme form by the colloquial use of the term to describe drug addiction): not only do we *hold on to* those things that we have become accustomed to regard as 'ours', but our habits can exert a powerful *hold on us*, even against our will. The notion of 'holding oneself' (and perhaps 'holding it together') also suggests the constancy and consistency of self-identity through time, change and affection. As we have seen, habit is a principle of both inwardness and appearance, and from the latter point of view a person's habit – her posture, her walk, her gestures, the incline of her head; in short, the way in which she holds herself – may be what most approximates to her essence: it is through this mobile form that an acquaintance recognizes her from a distance, even in silhouette and even after years of absence.

Habit implies continuity through time. It fulfils the role of the metaphysical concept of substance: instead of positing fixed, enduring entities (or essences of entities), we can regard the stable shapes of things – even things as ephemeral as personalities, days or folk songs – as due to repetition. This gives an intimation of the possibility of an account of selfhood based on the concept of habit. Insisting that existence must be grasped dynamically, in terms of becoming rather than being, Kierkegaard suggests that things 'stay the same' only if they are continually renewed – an insight he develops within a religious interpretation of life as a constant oscillation between gift and loss,

receptivity and resignation. If we recognize that the self, in its psychological and physical aspects, and as subject to the inward and external contents of its experience, is characterized by flux, then we need to account for its relative stability, its apparent identity through time. Why do we repeat ourselves – on a cellular level as well as in day-to-day life – with such order and predictability?

The survival and success of the human species would be inconceivable without habit. As William James notes, habit is remarkably efficient: it saves us time and energy, "simplifies our movements, makes them accurate, and diminishes fatigue [by reducing] the conscious attention with which our actions are performed."[10] According to Hume,

> Custom is the great guide of human life. It is that principle alone which renders our experience useful to us and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events to those which have appeared in the past. Without the influence of custom, we should be entirely ignorant of every matter of fact beyond what is immediately present to memory and senses... There would be an end at once of all action, as well as of the most part of speculation.[11]

Because we can accomplish so much through habit – waking in the morning, washing, dressing, having breakfast, travelling to work and so on – we are free to devote our attention to intellectual reflection, technological innovation, spiritual cultivation, artistic production, or idle daydreams. Habit also provides the very appealing sense of comfort, safety and ease that is engendered by familiarity: the habit of selfhood is like a home – carpeted, cushioned and carefully maintained – that insulates us from the threat of the unknown which, in fact, constitutes our future.[12]

2. Habit and selfhood

In proposing, like Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, some kind of equation between selfhood and habit, we are not merely saying that the self *has* habits, and that these are important, but making the far stronger claim that the self *is* a habit. This indicates a philosophical position very different from that of Aristotle and Aquinas: whereas they emphasize the role of habit from an ontological perspective based on the more fundamental concepts of substance and teleology, we are regarding habit as an alternative to these concepts. Self-identity is maintained through time not by virtue of an unchanging underlying entity, but through repeated action. (To be fairer to Aristotle, his concept of substance need not signify the solidity and stasis sometimes attributed to it

– but our concept of habit nevertheless calls into question even the logical distinction between substance and attribute.) The formation of the self occurs not, primarily, in relation to a final cause, but through the momentum of accumulated, contracted patterns. Adopting habit rather than teleology as the basic principle of nature implies that beings are formed from behind, as it were, rather than with reference to a goal.[13]

Defining the self in terms of the concept of habit appeals, naturally, to those committed to a philosophical position for which the self is not 'given'. Deleuze's 'transcendental empiricism' and westernized Buddhist teachings both exemplify this view. The importance of habit for Deleuze is illustrated most clearly in his short preface to the English translation of *Empiricism and Subjectivity* (1953), where he lists the concept of habit among Hume's "most essential and creative contributions" to philosophy:

> We start with atomic parts, but these atomic parts have transitions, passages, 'tendencies', which circulate from one to the other. These tendencies give rise to *habits*. Isn't this the answer to the question 'what are we?' We are habits, nothing but habits – the habit of saying 'I'. Perhaps there is no more striking answer to the problem of the self.[14]

Written in 1989, this preface is at once a reflection on Deleuze's earliest work, and among the latest of his writing. In the years between these two texts, Deleuze has repeated the assertion that the self is a habit, and he has examined and explicated the concept of habit, considered as a principle of human nature. He notes, but does not seem to be worried by, the "paradox" of proposing a principle from an empiricist perspective:

> The principle is the habit of contracting habits. A gradual formation, to be specific, is a principle, as long as we consider it in a general way. In Hume's empiricism. . .experimental reason is the result of habit – and not vice versa. Habit is the root of reason, and indeed the principle from which reason stems as an effect.[15]

As well as destabilizing the distinction between nature and culture, the concept of habit also helps to explain how nature becomes culture (or, how nature is cultivated through human action).

Deleuze suggests that, for an empiricist, "the subject is defined by the movement through which it develops."[16] A Buddhist philosopher would no doubt endorse this view: the twin doctrines of the impermanence of all things (*anicca*) and the absence of a substantial, enduring self (*anatta*) are indispensable to Buddhism in all its historical and regional variations. Those who teach Buddhist theory and practice in the West often invoke the concept of

habit to describe the self-identity to which we have become attached, and from which, the Buddha taught, liberation can be attained.[17] This identification of the self as a habit, or a collection of habits, reflects the importance of the concept of *samskara* (or, in Pali, *sankhara*) in Indian thought. The complexity of this concept is illustrated by the variety of its translations: mental formation, disposition, construction, reaction, volition, conditioning, subliminal impression, karmic impulse, inherited forces, habitual potency – or simply "habits or tendencies."[18] Like habit, *samskara* is at once active and passive, at once a source and a form of action: "both the activity which constructs temporal reality, and the temporal reality thus constructed, are *samskara*."[19] According to Buddhist teaching, *samskara* is one of the five *khandas* (aggregates or aspects) of human nature, and also the second link in the chain of 'conditioned arising' or 'dependent origination', which expresses the key idea that the cycle of becoming continues without any self, causal agent or enduring subject of *karma* (action).[20] As Lilian Silburn observes,

> It is around the verb *samskr* – the activity which shapes, arranges together, consolidates, and brings to completion – that the reflections of the Buddha are concentrated. . . for it is here that one finds the key to [his teaching] which posits a certain kind of action as the source of reality.[21]

The teaching of the Buddha and the philosophy of Deleuze converge on this idea that habit provides the key to the shape not only of human nature, but of nature itself, considered in the widest sense as inclusive of the cultural forms that have emerged from human action. "This living present, and with it the whole of organic and psychic life, rests upon habit."[22] Buddhist doctrine emphasizes the role of desire, or craving, as the driving force of the continuity of habit, whilst Deleuze highlights the basic "need" of the organism that fulfils the same function.[23]

Returning to Merleau-Ponty, we recall that "my own body is my basic habit, the one that conditions all the others, and by means of which they are mutually comprehensible." I would now like to reflect on the priority of the 'lived body' suggested here, and in particular on the notion of 'conditioning' that Merleau-Ponty invokes to express this priority. How – or, at least, in what sense – does the 'lived body' bring together, form and make "comprehensible" the various (and variable) habits of which the self is composed?

In order to address this question, I will first attempt to outline the conditions of the phenomenon of habit itself. Of course, it is possible to offer a biological, physiological or psychological explanation of habit – but, from a philosophical point of view, we are concerned with what might be described as the transcendental conditions of habit. How must the subject be constituted

so as to be capable of habit, so as to make possible the formation of habits? Since I am suggesting that selfhood may be interpreted in terms of habit, identifying the conditions of the possibility of habit will tell us more about the self, considered in this way.[24]

We have already identified habit as both a form of action and a source of action. In order to be capable of habit, then, a subject must be capable of action. We can further distinguish four basic conditions of habit, which may be regarded as modifications of action: retention, synthesis, affectivity and plasticity. These can be grouped into two pairs, corresponding to the capacities to accumulate or contract repeated actions, and to be formed by this repetition. First, then, the phenomenon of habit implies the retention and the synthesis of repeated elements.[25] Repetition is productive – the second time adds something to the first – only if actions can be accumulated, held together somehow; only if the past can be contracted within the present. For Hume (as for Kant), it is the imagination that fulfils this function. Deleuze, on the other hand, describes the subject's contractile power as "contemplation," emphasizing both the dynamism and the passivity of this synthetic process. Deleuze posits a "soul" that contemplates and contracts repeated elements, "like a sensitive plate" – and here the soul must be understood in the Aristotelian sense as a faculty, a collection of *dunameis* (powers), rather than as a metaphysical entity. Crucially, Deleuze conceives this soul as a faculty of organic matter:

> A soul must be attributed to the heart, to the muscles, nerves and cells, but a contemplative soul whose entire function is to contract a habit. . . What organism is not made of elements and cases of repetition, of contemplated and contracted water, nitrogen, carbon, chlorides and sulphates, thereby intertwining all the habits of which it is composed?[26]

It is this passive synthesis, occurring in 'my own body', that grounds the historicality of the subject, making possible the active synthesis of memory. Habit does not require memory, but rather a retention of the traces of past actions which may or may not become conscious. Indeed, the automatic, unreflective mechanism of habit is connected more to forgetfulness than to recollection; it is precisely those habitual actions of our daily routine that we do not remember performing.[27]

Second, the formative effects of habit imply the affectivity and plasticity of the subject. As Spinoza notes, the nature of an individual depends on its capacity to be affected: the complexity and sophistication of human beings is a function of our sensitivity to affection in so many different ways. We are formed by what we suffer, and these sufferings affect us precisely in so far as

we are able to receive and retain impressions, and to be modified by them. We speak of being 'scarred' by traumatic experiences, but it is equally important to recognize that we (our own bodies) are scarred or formed, in however slight a way, *by our own actions*, whether mental, vocal or physical. This emphasizes the dynamism of subjectivity, the fact that one is continuously forming – whether re-forming or re-affirming – the self.[28]

Spinoza's account of the impact of bodies upon one another highlights the highly contagious quality of habits: we 'contract' habits not only inwardly, but from those around us, 'catching' their mannerisms, accents, intonations, modes of dress, and even their virtues and vices – and we notice others' habits less and less as we contract them. The self's capacity to be affected and molded renders it irreducibly social, irreducibly worldly, so that the distinction between habit and habitat is less clear than we might suppose. This is particularly true of linguistic habits: in order to communicate we must repeat words and phrases already in circulation, already meaningful, and this mobile resource of signs is the habitat, the "house of being", which domesticates or renders familiar the flux of sense-experience. At the same time, there is a singularity of repetition in so far as the 'soul' (and body) of each individual is a unique configuration of retentions, contractions and patterns of sensitivity, action and reaction. Only I can repeat myself; only I can say 'I' and mean *me*, although I do so in the presence of and in communication with others.

In addition to the 'transcendental' conditions of retention and synthesis, affectivity and plasticity, we can identify a quality of inattention that is less a constitutive faculty than an essential aspect of the functioning of habit. James suggests that "habit depends on sensations not attended to."[29] As a source of action, habit is opposed to deliberate reflection and decision, and this is connected to the ease and efficiency it affords. Repetition has a numbing effect: the more we become used or habituated to something, the less we notice it. For this reason one 'takes for granted' and assumes as one's own what is most constant and familiar: one's parents, one's native language, the level of material comfort with which one has grown up. These things are, of course, acutely missed when they are taken from us: the inattention of habit both contributes to and obscures profound attachment, and is consequently a source of suffering when things change.[30]

This gives an indication of the significance of 'my own body' as 'my basic habit' – for what are we more accustomed to than our bodies, our senses, the force of gravity, and the sensations produced by the perpetual growth and decay of this organism? Following Husserl (whose "transcendental reduction" arrives at embodiment as that which makes possible the movement of intentionality), Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that 'my own body' does not refer to a physical object among others in the world, but to a perspective, a

"pivot" or a "mediator" in relation to which objects and events first appear, take their places or occur within a world.[31] In other words, *my* body is not something seen but a position, and a disposition, that is the condition of seeing anything at all. And this body is a habit: it functions precisely insofar as it is not itself an object of attention. (When we are called into awareness of the body, by intense pain or pleasure, there is such a forgetfulness of the world that it seems to disappear, or at least to shrink to the field of sensation with which we have become absorbed – but even in this case what we are aware of is a modification of the body rather than embodiment as such.) 'My own body', 'my basic habit', discloses and conditions a world only by virtue of looking away from itself. To describe *the self* as a habit is to suggest a repeated movement, entirely functional and efficient, that both conceals and tightly, possessively holds on to its own becoming.

Another reason to regard 'my own body' as my basic habit is that it is the site, and often the symbol, of suffering. In recognizing affectivity and plasticity as conditions of habit, a neutral concept of suffering is already included – but the fact that our habits make life easier and more comfortable (more *lived in*) suggests an impulse to ease and comfort drawn from a sense of irritation and agitation. This kind of suffering is, in turn, habitual, since it consists of patterns of response to certain sensations on the body. If suffering is the condition of the body, *my* body is also a condition of suffering.

We may, then, propose an equivalence between 'my own body', the self, and habit. Each of these categories resists objectification and reduction to either a psychological process or a physical entity; each denotes an identity and a continuity that rests not on something fixed that endures through time, but on movements of repetition. Conceived in this way, the subject appears as a collection of faculties, capacities or *dunameis* of retention, synthesis, affectivity and plasticity – as a machine, perhaps, but a machine that suffers. However, having identified these conditions it may be possible to correlate their operation with concrete processes; to locate patterns and accumulations of activity in the brain, muscles, cells and so on. For example, the formation of habits may be explained physiologically in terms of neural 'pathways' that are strengthened with each repeated action; more phenomenologically, one might experience a 'holding' of tension in the shoulders, temples or jaw, of grief in the heart, of fear in the stomach. It has recently been suggested that habits of respiration, such as constriction or quickening of the breath, at once express and maintain patterns of emotional response.[32] The physical body, in both its material and its functional aspects, bears traces of previous actions: it *contains* its past in its movements and positions, so that its material structure represents a kind of cross-section of an historical existence. By prioritizing the principle of habit, and emphasizing accordingly the affectivity and plasticity

of the individual, we regard actions not as discreet, and not merely as effects of the will, but as elements of a kind of continual training, so that each action is a reaction that stretches beyond itself to condition subsequent actions. (This suggests a version of Nietzsche's idea of 'eternal recurrence' as a kind of ethical test: *do you will this action to be repeated indefinitely? do you will this action to become a habit? do you will to become* this *self*?[33]) As a site and a center of action, the body synthesizes the past and the future without, however, enduring unchanged through them.

All this suggests that the dynamic entity we call 'the self' can be identified with an ongoing process of conditioning – at once active and passive, the agent and the effect of this process. As Buddhist philosophy illustrates, conditioning is different from causation precisely insofar as it does not involve the concept of a self-subsistent or substantial source of change; to use a Kantian vocabulary, causation belongs to the noumenal sphere whereas conditioning is purely phenomenal, metaphysically 'empty'.[34] The fact that habit rests on a kind of concealment or oblivion – neatly expressed by the notion of habit as a mode of dress, something that covers one up – naturally prompts the question of what is concealed (who wears the habit?), but there is no need to posit a distinct self within or underneath the layers of habit, and indeed it does not make sense to do so. What habits conceal, then, is precisely this emptiness, this lack of a fixed, permanent, substantial core.

3. Becoming different: The question of liberation

Many consequences follow from, and many questions are raised by, this interpretation of the self as a 'creature of habit'. If the self not only has habits but is a product of habit, how can it be capable of what we might regard as 'other' than habit: spontaneity, creativity, change, freedom? What about the 'first time' that originates the repetition, that is reproduced and yet irrecoverable by it? Must habit's origin be precisely its 'other'?[35] Two striking metaphors for habit are a chain, a series of links that holds one back, holds one steady, or holds one prisoner; and a veil, a customary covering. These metaphors may conceal the dynamic, active quality of holding and covering, but they express the ambivalent value of habit, or rather its plural evaluations.[36] Habits bring comfort, ease and efficiency, and thus a kind of liberation; they also signify a lack of freedom and a lack of awareness – values often posited as a goal of an ethical or spiritual life.

In defining the self in terms of the movement through which it develops, we have avoided a teleological interpretation of this process of becoming. From an ethical point of view, however, we live with reference to values, goals and

projects, and often with a sense of self-improvement and self-cultivation – for through the specifically human habits of language and reflective thought we are able to become aware of our habits; to recognize them as good or bad, healthy or unhealthy; and to posit something different. We can even reflect on and evaluate habit as such. Aristotle's ethics, like his account of human nature, is wisely based on this combination of habit and teleology, but is unsettled by the uneasy relationship between the two. For Aristotle, the moral project shared by the self and the community consists in the cultivation of virtues (good habits) and the elimination of vices (bad habits), and his advice on accomplishing this project is very useful. However, this account of ethics leaves open the gap between desiring the good and actually achieving it, perhaps underestimating the tenacity of habitual patterns and the depth of their inscription upon, or within, the body.

The disparity between one's ethical or religious goal, and one's current condition (at once tragic and comic, a gap occupied by indecision, procrastination and relapse) is recognized more clearly in Aquinas' adaptation of Aristotelian ethics, where it receives a theological interpretation in terms of sin. Sin, like habit, is characterized by a lack of awareness and a lack of freedom – and thus remains in tension with the moral teleology that Aquinas wants to preserve. It is a bondage and an ignorance of the whole being, of the will and the heart as well as of the body. (If we regard the self in dualistic terms, then the bondage and the suffering that shape it are also understood dualistically – and this conceals an ignorance of the depth of conditioning which itself binds the subject further. The struggle from habit to freedom is not a struggle between the body and the mind, or between the body and the will. This calls into question not only rationalist ethical theories such as those of Plato and Kant, but also the tendency of 'existentialist' philosophers to equate authenticity with freedom and choice, expressed by an emphasis on categories such as decision, resolution and commitment.)

The practical problem of desiring and willing the good, yet being unable to actualize it, has been encountered and wrestled with by countless religious writers: in the Christian tradition these include St Paul, Augustine, Luther and Kierkegaard. Paul describes the condition of sin in his letter to the Romans: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it."[37] When Augustine comments on this text, and recalls his own struggle to become good, he recognizes that "the rule of sin is the force of habit, by which the mind is swept along and held fast even against its will." At this point in his *Confessions*, Augustine has already had the truth revealed to him, and has a "new will" to serve God, but nevertheless

> I was held fast, not in fetters clamped upon me by another, but by my own will, which had the strength of iron chains... For my will was perverse and desire had grown from it, and when I gave in to desire habit was born, and when I did not resist the habit it became a necessity... These two wills within me, one old, one new, one the servant of the flesh, the other of the spirit, were in conflict and between them they tore my soul apart.[38]

Augustine feels that he is in bondage to habit, but also reaching beyond it towards God, truth and new life, and these opposing forces seem to tear him apart inwardly. He records how his soul "is wrenched in two and suffers great trials, because while truth teaches it to prefer one course, habit prevents it from relinquishing the other."[39] (This struggle pervades the Kantian subject, too, who is divided between the truth and perfection of the moral law, and a persistent disposition towards self-gratification.)

So how is freedom possible for a self that is no more than a habit? Is creativity, the capacity for newness, an illusion conjured by language (which itself requires repetition), or does it really belong to the self? More to the point, can I ever be the way I want to be? Whether one's goal is to eat more healthily, to abstain from smoking cigarettes or telling lies, or to live one's life in imitation of Christ, realizing it can be far more difficult than choosing and committing to it. If we identify the self with habit, and recognize that habit is a force of bondage with "the strength of iron chains", then this implies that the self is, in its very essence, an obstacle to liberation.

As I have suggested, developing the emphasis on habit found in the philosophies of Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze into an account of subjectivity leads to a certain understanding of action, and this has implications for the issue of free will. Regarding the self as a habit at once indicates that it is possible to change, and helps to explain why it is so difficult to change. This shifts the focus of meta-ethics from the opposition between freedom and determinism to that between the relative states of bondage and liberation: habit forms and fixes the self and yet it presupposes renewal, affectivity and plasticity – the capacity to learn. Within religious contexts, liberation or salvation is a goal for one's life, and morality is an essential element of the path towards this goal; secular ethics (and I include here Kantian ethics), on the other hand, posits freedom as the ground of morality and often asserts a claim to freedom as our right. It is no surprise that we find in our religious traditions a more serious and profound encounter with the difficulty of becoming different, and a more productive effort to teach and learn techniques of liberation.

4. Beyond habit

The interpretation of selfhood outlined here suggests that our ethical situation is conditioned by an opposition, or a tension, between liberation and ubiquity rather than between freedom and necessity. The familiarity associated with habit has a concealing effect, for we notice less what is most consistently present: we are never without or apart from our selves, just as we are never without or apart from our own bodies. How can I pass beyond that which constitutes me – for who would be carrying out this movement? The task of liberation, it seems, involves the paradoxical idea of self-transcendence: one cannot lift oneself up by one's own shoelaces, but must instead look to another for help. If I am *nothing but* self, there is no way of transcending myself; if I am *nothing but* habit, there is no way of liberation through my own actions.

From a theological point of view, the way of liberation is one of self-surrender and an openness to divine grace. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me", writes Paul. Sin dies only if 'I' die, whether one's sense of self is opened up to the new life of Christ, surrendered to God, or loosened and eroded through meditation on transience. Liberation is inseparable from transcendence, from an 'otherness' that encompasses the powers of God and of death. Indeed, Kierkegaard equates true freedom with transcendence, which he presents as a repeated "double movement" of loss and gift, of giving up and receiving back, of death and new life; this is the movement through which the individual develops, maintains and deepens his relationship with God. Only if the gift is surrendered can it be given again: the self *is* only by virtue of repetition. The oscillation between being and non-being is the form of time, of its 'continuity'. Jacques Derrida distinguishes two kinds of future: the one anticipated and planned on the basis of habit, and *l'avenir*, that which is 'to come' and may only be awaited without knowing, without expectation. Habit projects into the future through a persistent self-affirmation, a repetition of what has already been; whereas that which is 'to come' always includes death or dissolution. This distinction between two ways of becoming inhabits the self – inhabits 'my own body' – and yet posits its other, its formlessness and death. Death is "the gift" insofar as, like grace, it provides a release from selfhood.

An authentic philosophy of religion must recognize that self-surrender and transcendence are not intellectual acts – since true, complete self-surrender means letting go of the whole of the self, and thus involves one's body. Religious traditions teach practices through which the self's relationship to God is lived – practices such as prayer, meditation and liturgical rituals, all of which take place through the body and often in specific postures. Practice, like habit,

implies repetition: religious practices, although oriented towards liberation, are codified in rules and customs; religious people are those who live according to a *regula fidei* – a text like Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* testifies to the power of repetition in forming a self. Here again we seem to reach a paradox, for if religious practices accomplish a kind of re-conditioning – a replacing of bad habits with pious ones – how can this lead to liberation, to transcendence? How can I surrender myself in a way that is not a reinforcing, or at least a perpetuation, of the self?

The answer to these questions lies in the fact that practices are not merely habits; that prayer, meditation and worship are not merely ritual enactments of a theological idea of self-surrender. These spiritual exercises also involve a cultivation of attention and mindfulness, and often a focusing of this attention on someone (such as Jesus or the Buddha) who exemplifies the qualities to which the practitioner aspires. The awareness that is developed and practiced in this way is the 'other' of habit, just as God is the 'other' of the self – for as James suggests, "habit depends on sensations that are not attended to." Awareness has the power to *unconceal* habits, and so to weaken and eventually unravel them. Through repetition, the self creates itself, but I do not create my own awareness: I live out of it, for it makes consciousness or being-in-the-world possible. Awareness is the basis of my existence and yet my self, in its very essence, suppresses it and hides from it. Awareness, like habit, can be correlated with 'my own body' – and this presents the possibility of freedom, for at every moment one has a choice between awareness of or obliviousness to one's living, breathing experience. Developing or uncovering awareness within 'my own body' counters the habit of selfhood, especially when attention turns to the transience of sensations. Whilst habit is constructive, productive, this kind of awareness is de-constructive – particularly of the attachment that is intrinsic to habit.

Religious practice turns the mechanism of habit against itself, utilizing the three-fold process of action, repetition and formation but transforming this, *with attention*, from a force of bondage to a force for liberation. Only because practice shares with habit its mode of operation can it exert any power upon it – for habits cannot be broken all at once, by a single act. Of course, desires may be restrained at the physical level, but the habit of desire cannot itself be controlled by the intellect or the will. Habits carry a momentum that must be countered by an opposing momentum. Transcendence is, then, a double process: a dynamic relationship between self and Other, and also a relationship between habit and awareness. (In a sense, the opposition between self and Other is equivalent to that between habit and awareness.) It is a renunciation and an appeal to grace, and yet it also requires a consistent effort of attentiveness and self-examination – and not merely on an intellectual level.

Understanding the correlation between habit and selfhood illuminates the various techniques taught by religious traditions, explaining how these actually work to realize liberation. Prayer, for example, involves a gathering and a purification of attention within the body, which may be practiced by focusing on the breath:

> It is a mistake to ignore the body in prayer... My body is me. It is the external sign of the soul... We can train the body to be still, quiet, attentive, and so exercise a calming influence on the mind in prayer. The disciplined attention of our body is for many of us not easily achieved, but it can arrived at with practice. We can kneel or stand in prayer if we like, but the best position is to sit... the first exercise in prayer could well be just to sit and allow the body to become still, paying full attention to the relaxing of one's muscles, before even thinking about becoming present to God. We have to be present to our own selves, first body, then mind, before attempting to be present to God... A good way of praying is simply to make oneself conscious of one's breathing and to *feel* God's creative spirit being infused into one, natural and supernatural life being inflated into one simultaneously... We need look no further for proof of God's grace. It is here present in our bodies with every breath we breathe.[40]

This emphasis on posture, breathing and attentiveness is fundamental to most methods of meditation, which are essentially a means of accessing through one's own body the natural, given, self-less awareness that can also be described as emptiness itself. (There is an equivalence between the notions of emptiness, Brahman, God and Self insofar as each signifies a reality that transcends myself and constitutes my liberation.) One of the earliest Buddhist texts, the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta*, teaches that the "establishing of awareness...is the one and only way...for walking on the path of truth, for the realization of *nibbana*."[41] This *sutta* outlines in detail a technique of meditation, beginning with an attentiveness to the body:

> And how, monks, does a monk dwell observing body in body? ...In this way he trains himself: "Feeling the whole body, I shall breathe in." "Feeling the whole body, I breathe out," thus he trains himself. [These instructions are repeated more than once.] Thus he dwells observing body in body internally...or externally...or both internally and externally. Thus he dwells observing the phenomen[a] of arising in the body...of passing away in the body...of arising and passing away in the body. Now his awareness is established: "This is body!" Thus he develops his awareness to such an extent that there is mere understanding along with mere awareness... Again, monks, a monk while he is walking, understands properly: "I am walking"; while he is standing...sitting...lying down, he understands properly... In whichever position he disposes his body, he understands it properly... Now his awareness is established: "This is body!" [and so on...][42]

If we want to approach texts like these philosophically, the view that 'my own body is my basic habit' provides a perspective that illuminates both their meaning and their use in practice, as guides to liberation.[43] This perspective proves particularly fruitful when addressing the comparative questions that arise from religious pluralism: although the two texts juxtaposed here belong to traditions that are doctrinally very far apart, they exhibit a striking affinity on the level of practice. If the philosophy of religion is to remain relevant to contemporary spirituality, an expansion of its traditional focus on metaphysical doctrines is essential.

This paper, in articulating an interpretation of selfhood in terms of habit, has focused on the religious ideas of liberation and transcendence, and on the practices that are taught as ways to realize these ultimate goals. One reason for this is that, as we have seen, religious writers have tended, more than most philosophers, to address readers in their whole, embodied being; to advocate a surrender of the self (even its intellect!); and to be willing to embrace the paradoxical. Of course, we have dealt very quickly here with such complex theological concepts as grace and transcendence, which have been discussed at great length elsewhere – but I would like to suggest that secular ethics might benefit from the wisdom accumulated through centuries of religious practice. (Although I have offered examples from Christian and Buddhist literature, texts from other spiritual traditions express similar insights.) In particular, recognizing the power of habit directs the moral philosopher to begin not with an assertion of freedom as our essence or our right, but with an examination of the ways in which we are not free – for awareness and understanding of one's constitution and conditioning give some momentum to the project of overcoming or at least improving it. Familiarity with the patterns of one's susceptibilities also helps one to take responsibility for them: Spinoza suggests that morality consists in prudently arranging one's encounters, and this includes taking care over our influence on others as well as associating with those who have a positive effect on us. Insight into the conditioning we share with others makes it easier to practice compassion and forgiveness – qualities which themselves have a liberating effect on both giver and recipient. In any case, we need not appeal to theology or faith: the naturalistic interpretation of the self as a habit, drawn from empiricist, phenomenological and Buddhist lines of thought, is of value to the philosophy of religion precisely because it presents an alternative to metaphysical categories which are in a sense already theological. The concept of habit, examined philosophically, can help to illuminate the embodied, living, social beings with which both religious teachings and secular ethics are always, in practice, concerned.

Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, p. x.
2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 91.
3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book Two, Chapter One.
4. More specifically, Hume suggests that habit accounts for our belief in the principle of causation: we become so accustomed to the constant conjunction between two objects or events that in time the mind connects them automatically, and, in accordance with its tendency to "spread itself over the external world", mistakes its own habit for a necessary connection between the things themselves. See Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Book I, Part III, Section xiv.
5. Merleau-Ponty (echoing Schopenhauer) develops the concept of the "lived body", or "my own body", in order to present an account of human embodiment *from the inside*, as it were – without either objectifying the body, or denying the physicality of selfhood.
6. Aquinas offers a careful analysis of '*habitus*' in general before discussing virtue in particular, but his account is rather dry and narrow, overlooking the richness and complexity of habit considered phenomenologically. See Aquinas' *Summa Theologia* volume 22, Q.49–52. Étienne Gilson's *The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* includes a useful discussion of habit; see pp. 244–251.
7. *The Oxford English Dictionary*.
8. William James, *Psychology, Briefer Course*, in James McDermott (ed.), *The Writings of William James*, pp. 9–10. Gilles Deleuze makes a similar point in *Difference and Repetition*, p. 75.
9. Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, p. 66. This echoes Evanus' maxim: "It comes, my friend, by practice year on year – and see: At last this thing we practice our own nature is,"
   which is cited by Aristotle to illustrate his view that habit is "a second nature" – see the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book Seven, Chapter Ten.
10. William James, *op. cit.*, *Psychology, Briefer Course*, p. 12.
11. Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 44. Hegel makes a similar point in his *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 143.
12. This may be regarded positively or negatively, according to one's preference for order and stability, or spontaneity and originality: Krishnamurti, for example, speaks rather disparagingly of the fact that "the mind likes to function in grooves, in habits: it is safe, secure. . ."; Krishnamurti, *The Impossible Question*, p. 129. See also *Beginnings of Learning*, pp. 141–147.
13. A parallel may be drawn between this philosophical view and Pierre Bourdieu's use of the concept of 'habitus' in the social sciences. Bourdieu, building on the work of Durkheim and Mauss, makes 'habitus' central to his theory of practice – and here, as I suggest above, this proposes an alternative to understanding action as purposive, and as originating from the free will of a pure, discreet subject. See Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, pp. 79–81. Mauss discusses his notion of 'habitus' in his lecture on 'Body Techniques'; see *Sociology and Psychology* pp. 95–123, and especially pp. 101–102. For a discussion of the concept of habit in sociology (focusing in particular on Durkheim, Weber and the history of the discipline) see Charles Camic, 'The Matter of Habit', *The American Journal of Sociology* vol. 91, no. 5 (March 1996), pp. 1039–1087.

14. Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, p. x. See also pp. 92–93: "Anticipation is habit, and habit is anticipation: these two determinations – the thrust of the past and the élan toward the future – are, at the centre of Hume's philosophy, the two aspects of the same fundamental dynamism. . . Habit is the constitutive root of the subject, and the subject, at root, is the synthesis of time – the synthesis of the present and the past in the light of the future."
15. ibid., p. 66. This echoes Bergson's observation that habits are not themselves natural, but what is natural is the tendency – or more to the point, the habit – to contract and develop habits; see p. 44. For an illuminating discussion of Deleuze and Bergson, see Keith Ansell Pearson's *Germinal Life: the Difference and Repetition of Gilles Deleuze*, especially pp. 20–76; 209–224.
16. ibid., p. 85.
17. See, for example, Sangharakshita's *The Taste of Freedom*, pp. 19–20.
18. Nagapriya, *Exploring Karma and Rebirth*, p. 57. Here the author includes a diagram illustrating "the cycle of habit formation." For discussion of the translation of *samskara*, see Ian Whicher, *The Integrity of the Yoga Darsana*, pp. 99–103 and 274–275; David Carpenter, 'Practice Makes Perfect: The Role of Practice (*Abhyasa*) in Patanjala Yoga', *Yoga: the Indian Tradition*, ed. Ian Whicher and David Carpenter, pp. 40–45; and Lakshmi Kapari, *La Notion de Samskara dans L'Inde Brahamique et Buddhique*, pp. 475–503.
19. Stephen Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p. 202.
20. For a clear explanation of this doctrine, see Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, pp. 54–60. Early Buddhist texts identify twelve 'links' in the chain of conditioned arising, and since each link is dependent on all the others it is explained by the cycle as a whole. In this way, the doctrine suggests an alternative transcendental analysis of habit to the one presented below.
21. Lilian Silburn, *Instant et Cause*, p. 200.
22. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 78.
23. ibid., p. 73.
24. (See note 21 above.)
25. The notions of synthesis and retention are discussed by Husserl in his *Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis* and *Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, and Deleuze's analysis draws on this aspect of Husserl's philosophy.
26. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, pp. 74–75. See also p. 70 for Deleuze's interpretation of the Humean imagination.
27. On this point, see Samuel Butler's *Life and Habit*, p. 4. This text offers an interpretation of life in terms of habit that closely resembles the Indian philosophy of karma and rebirth: Butler regards human history not as a succession of distinct beings but as a series of connected actions, so that each individual life contains and expresses the memories of former lives. He suggests that our habits precede our existence as individuals, so that the experience of the race is "the experience of a single being only, repeating in a great many different ways certain performances with which he has become exceedingly familiar. . . We must suppose the continuity of life and sameness between living beings, whether plants or animals, and their descendants, to be far closer than we have hitherto believed; so that the experience of one person is not enjoyed by his successor, so much as that the successor is *bonâfide* but a part of the life of his progenitors, imbued with all his memories, profiting by all his experiences – which are, in fact, his own – and only unconscious of the extent of is own memories and experiences owing to their vastness and already infinite repetitions." (p. 50)

28. It is often supposed that people become less plastic, less impressionable as they grow older, when habits harden into a fixed character that is increasingly difficult to alter. William James remarks rather wistfully that if only the young were to realize "how soon they will become mere walking bundles of habits, they would give more heed to their conduct while they are in the plastic state. . ."; William James, *op. cit*., *Psychology, Briefer Course*, p. 20.
29. ibid., p. 14.
30. Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* is preoccupied by this theme, depicting habit as "an annihilating force which suppresses the originality and even the awareness of one's perceptions. . . a dread deity, so riveted to one's being, its insignificant face so incrusted in one's heart, that if it detaches itself, if it turns away from one, this deity that one had barely distinguished inflicts on one sufferings more terrible than any other and is then as cruel as death itself." See Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, volume 5, p. 478.
31. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 145.
32. See Donna Farhi, *The Breathing Book.*
33. Nietzsche describes eternal recurrence as 'the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was an is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated to all eternity'. See *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 56, and also *The Gay Science*, Section 341; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Chapter Three, 'The Convalescent'.
34. See Jay Garfield's excellent commentary to his translation of Nagarjuna's *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (especially pp. 103–123) for a discussion of the Buddhist doctrine of conditioning and emptiness. Garfield presents these difficult ideas in the context of western philosophical debate, drawing parallels with Hume's analysis of causation. See also Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, pp. 99–102.
35. This suggests another paradox of habit, and by implication a paradox of selfhood: the concept of habit raises the question of origins – of a first, free, unconditioned action – and yet such an action would be excluded from the concept of habit as its 'other'. Habits only begin when originality is lost or concealed. Two possible responses to this elusiveness of the origin are mysticism and mythology: a function of myths is to account for 'the first time' (see Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of Eternal Return*). Jacques Derrida teases out the connection between myth, habit and writing in 'Plato's Pharmacy': "One thus begins by repeating without knowing through a myth – the definition of writing: which is to repeat without knowing." See *Dissemination*, p. 75.
36. See Nietzsche's discussion of habit in *The Gay Science*, Section 295: "I love brief habits and consider them an inestimable means for getting to know *many* things and states, down to the bottom of their sweetness and bitternesses. . . *Enduring* habits I hate. I feel as if a tyrant had come near me and as if the air I breathe had thickened. . . Most intolerable, to be sure, and the terrible par excellence would be for me a life entirely devoid of habits, a life that would demand perpetual improvisation. That would be my exile and my Siberia."
37. In the context of the rest of Romans 7, this passage suggests a conflict between the mind and the body: the mind obeys the spiritual law of God, but the body is ruled by the law of sin. (The significance of the term 'flesh' (*sarx*) in Paul's writings is complex: it is sometimes neutral, sometimes negative; it sometimes refers quite straightforwardly to the physical body, but it can also mean moral weakness and sin. See John Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity*, pp. 77–80.) But maybe the distinction between mind and body refers to the conscious and the unconscious – to intention and to habit. "It is no longer I who do it": not the conscious self, but the unconscious "sin that dwells within me". This 'no longer I' is in fact the habit

that preserves the I, preserves the old self whom one now sees, desires to overcome, and yet remains conditioned by.

38. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII, Section 5.
39. ibid., Book VIII, Section 10. See also Book X, Section 40.
40. John Dalrymple, *Simple Prayer*, pp. 60–63.
41. *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* (or 'Great Discourse on Establishing Awareness'), p. 3.
42. Ibid., pp. 5–7.
43. Yuasa Yasuo's *The Body* discusses various Asian practices, such as Buddhist meditation, kundalini yoga and acupuncture in the context of the philosophical accounts of the body suggested by Henri Bergson and Merleau-Ponty; see especially pp. 161–201. Catherine Pickstock's *After Writing: on the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* interprets the medieval Roman Rite, the theology of the Eucharist and other forms of Christian liturgy in the light of a concept of repetition developed from Derrida's reading of Plato; see especially pp. 23–25; 106–108; 220–266. Pickstock concludes her essay by suggesting that "every Eucharist is an essential repetition of the incarnation", so that "our attempt to return to our divine origin is not so much a journey towards God, as a journey towards God's entry into our body – both physical and relational – which *really happens*... And whereas in Plato, the body is ultimately left behind, in Christianity, the spirit and the body together might be received back again on the eschatological morning."