

Habit and Intention

Christos Douskos^{1,2} 

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Abstract Several authors have argued that the things one does in the course of skilled and habitual activity present a difficult case for the ‘standard story’ of action. They are things intentionally done, but they do not seem to be suitably related to mental states. I suggest that once manifestations of habit are properly distinguished from exercises of skills and other kinds of spontaneous acts, we can see that habit raises a distinctive sort of problem. I examine certain responses that have been given, as well as responses that could be given on behalf of the standard story to the problems presented by habitual activity. These responses rely on the idea of a kind of intention that does not ensue from conscious thought or deliberation. I raise three different objections to this line of response. The conclusion is that habit explains aspects of human behavior that cannot be accounted by ascribing intentions of any kind.

Keywords Habit · Skill · Standard story of action · Subsidiary actions · Automaticity

An objection to the so-called standard story of action is that it cannot account for certain kinds of things we do in the course of skilled and habitual activities.¹

According to this story we act intentionally only if what we do causally ensues from mental states with pertinent content. Since many of the things one does in the course of skilled and habitual activities are intentionally done, it would seem that the standard story requires a multitude of mental states to be operative with respect of each one of these. But this seems implausible on several counts. Hence, the objection goes,

¹Versions of this objection are found in Ruben (2003: chs. 2-3); Pollard (2006); Di Nucci (2013); Valaris (2015). Related objections are raised in Wakefield and Dreyfus (1991); Romdenh-Romluc (2013).

✉ Christos Douskos
cidou@upatras.gr; cidou@otenet.gr

¹ Department of Philosophy, University of Athens, 17503 Athens, Greece

² Hellenic Open University, Patras, Greece

consideration of the skilled and habitual activities highlights the shortcomings of the standard story of action.

In this paper I examine a line of response to this objection. I shall suggest that in order to properly appreciate what is at stake in this debate, we should first distinguish between the different sorts of case that give rise to this objection. Both sides of the debate do not clearly distinguish between skilled and habitual activity, and as a consequence they fail to appreciate certain problems that arise exclusively with respect to habitual acts. These are my concern here. Proponents of the standard story have not paid much attention to habitual activity as such. But one finds several suggestions to the effect that the standard story can account for the intentional character of habitual acts by supposing that, just as in the case of ‘full blooded’ agency, these are causally generated by an intention. Habitual acts differ only with respect to the *origin* of this intention: it does not ensue from conscious thought or deliberation; and the agent might not even be aware of acting on this intention.² It is a common reaction that there is something theoretically unsatisfactory with postulating implicit mental states in view of addressing difficult cases for a theory. But here I identify a different sort of problem for this line of response: even if we allow for such intentions, these would still not explain all that needs to be explained with respect to habitual acts. I thereby conclude that the standard story cannot account for central features of habitual behavior.

In the first three sections I lay the groundwork for the argument that follows. In Section 1 I provide a brief characterization of the standard story and I explain certain terms that will be involved in the arguments that follow. In Section 2 I identify some central characteristics of habitual acts and introduce the idea of automaticity. On Section 3 I provide a bare-bones account of the differences between habit and bodily skill. Having made the necessary conceptual ground-clearing, in Section 4 I distinguish between two different sorts of problems for the standard story, and explain that one of them pertains specifically to habitual acts. In Section 5 I elaborate on the aforementioned line of response on behalf of the standard story. In Sections 6, 7 and 8 I identify three different problems for this line of response. I point to some further possible implications of this conclusion in Section 9.

1 The Standard Story of Action: central concepts

According to the standard story actions are events, an event is an action just in case it is intentional under some specification, and an action is intentional under some specification just in case it is suitably caused by a mental figuring pertinent content. Let me explain the central terms in this characterization. Events are datable unrepeatable particulars that have a temporal extension (‘token events’). According to the austere

² The idea that intentions can be acquired otherwise than on the basis of deliberation can be found, in some form or other, in Searle (1983: 84–85), Mele (1992: 177, 184, 137–140); Mele and Mozer (1994: 227); the idea is also implied in Enc (2003: 214), can be traced in Davidson (1978: 43). But these authors do not address specifically habitual activity, as opposed to various kinds of spontaneous and non-premeditated acts. Below I shall focus on the more recent statements of this idea in Clarke (2010) and Fridland (*forthcoming*), which are directed specifically to the idea of habit.

view of action individuation (Davidson 1963), these particulars can be variously described or specified. These specifications correspond to properties of action-particulars, the *things one does* in acting. When one *a*-ed by *b*-ing, *a* and *b* are two specifications (properties) of the same action, and the agent did two things on that occasion: he *a*-ed and he *b*-ed. Let us call *acts* the things done on occasion, or action-particulars under a specification.³ Among the various specifications of an action, some will figure in the content of the mental states from which the action causally ensues. These are specifications under which the agent acted intentionally. And since an event is an action just in case it is intentional under some specification, an event is an action just in case it is caused by mental states with pertinent content. The kind of causality involved is causation between event-particulars (I use ‘mental state’ for both states and mental events).

Different versions of the standard story differ with respect to various additional issues. Here I shall follow for the most part the exposition of Clarke (2010), for two reasons. First, Clarke articulates the common core of the most widely accepted versions (these include Mele 1992; Enc 2003, and with some qualifications Bratman 1987 and Brand 1984). Second, Clarke’s treatment of habitual and skilled activity will be one of my main targets in what follows.

The phrase ‘standard story’ was coined by Velleman (1992) for the kind of account originally articulated by Davidson (1963), where actions are caused by desire-belief pairs. These are the agent’s reasons, and reasons *rationalize* the action, that is, they make the action intelligible by pointing to the relevant aspects of the agent’s cognitive and motivational makeup. Hence an action explanation does two things: it rationalizes the action and identifies its causal origin. Later versions of the standard story assume that the aetiology of action figures intentions, a *sui generis* mental state that cannot be conceptually reduced to combinations of desires and beliefs. (I use the term ‘standard story’ more loosely than Velleman, to include these latter accounts). The content of intention is an action plan, and the attitude towards this content is one of commitment to act in a certain way (Bratman (1987), Mele (1992), Enc (2003), Clarke (2010)). The content of a plan consists in further subsidiary/instrumental intentions (Bratman 1987: 29), and is propositionally articulated. The lower-level representational states that guide the details of bodily action are not part of the content of intention (see Clarke (2010): 529)). These are typically sub-personal states with non-propositional content. However, most proponents of the standard story do not claim that one intentionally *a*-s only if *a* figures in the content of the intention from which *a*-ing ensues (this is what Bratman (1987) calls the *Simple View*). They subscribe to a more relaxed requirement: one intentionally *a*-s only if she has some intention from which *a*-ing causally ensues, but not necessarily one figuring *a* in its content.

Proponents of the standard story typically distinguish between *present-directed* and *future-directed* intentions, on the basis of their distinct functional roles. The formation of a future-directed intention to *a* tends to inhibit subsequent deliberation about whether

³ The reason for this use of ‘act’ (noun) is this. Actions are manifestations of habit or exercises of skill only under some specification(s). But the same specification/ thing one does, say making a cup of tea, can be habitual for some people but not for others, and can only be habitual for a person after the habit has been formed. So ‘is habitual’ predicates actions under some specification, that is, *acts*. It is a standard claim that a corresponding point holds for ‘is basic’ (Hornsby (1980: 69); Enc (2003): 54). This allows me to speak of habitual (or skillful/basic) *acts*.

to *a*, to rule out a course of action that the agent believes to be incompatible with *a*-ing, and to elicit deliberation about the means of *a*-ing (Bratman 1987; Mele 1992). When the time to *a* has come, a future-directed intention causes, or evolves into, a present-directed intention. The distinctive functional role of present-directed intentions is to initiate, causally sustain and guide the progress of the unfolding action. Some authors distinguish a third type of intention, *general intentions* or *policies* (Bratman 1987, 1989). These are standing intentions directed at multiple occasions, and can be initially characterized as intentions to do something on occasions where one is confronted with certain circumstances.

The core of the standard story concerns its account of basic acts. However, the various formulations of basicness offered are not always equivalent.⁴ I shall adopt a formulation which is more or less equivalent to Clarke's (2010: 525): *a* is a basic act just in case it is non-deviantly caused by a present-directed intention to *a*, and there is no other act, *b*-ing, which is the agent's means for *a*-ing. (So *b*-ing is the sub-basic specification of her action, and does not figure in the content of any intention).

Thus the standard story is a view regarding both the metaphysics and the explanation of action: it posits that events are actions by dint of having a type of causal explanation which identifies mental states in the event's causal ancestry. It follows that an event is an action in virtue of its standing in certain relation to something else, and thus is an *extrinsic* property of the event.

Below I am going to examine Clarke's (2010) reply on behalf of the standard story to the objection that this story cannot account for skilled *activity*, an objection most notably articulated by Ruben (2003). Clarke (2010: 523) takes activity to be a "coordinated sequences of actions". These range from exercises of sophisticated skills such as those involved in musical performance, to "humdrum, routine behaviors", such as dressing oneself (i.e. what we would ordinarily consider as habitual routines). This seems quite close to Ruben's own characterization of activity as "typically composed of more than one action, usually a large number of actions"; so activities are "composite items that have multiple actions as their parts" (Ruben 2003: 42). These parts are *subsidiary* actions, that is, distinct actions that are typically performed only as a means to some larger action.⁵

On the austere view of action-individuation, an action is a manifestation of a habit or the exercise of a skill only under certain specification(s). Accordingly, we may say that an activity is habitual or skilled under some specification when each of its component actions is, under at least one specification, a manifestation of a habit or the exercise of a skill respectively. Skilled and habitual activities are composed of skilled and habitual acts respectively.

⁴ Enc (2003) is considered the most comprehensive account of basicness on behalf of the standard story.

⁵ On the notion of subsidiary action, see Searle (1983: 84-85); Ruben (2003: chs.2-4); Valaris (2015). The conception of activity above relies on some criterion of what counts as a simple, non-complex action, for otherwise every action would count as an activity. Clarke does not address this question (indeed, some points made in section [7] imply that he has no means to answer it). Ruben says that he relies on reader's intuitions here, but latter in his book he provides a discussion of simple actions and their non-actional parts (Ruben 2003: 63–65, 141–147). Notice that on this conception activities are (composite) particulars, not (types of) activity like drinking and swimming. This conception also differs from a conception on which any action-part, however small, is made of activity. See Hornsby (2013) for a discussion of these distinctions.

2 Habits of Action: a Partial Characterization

I shall mostly be concerned with the idea of habit as it enters in our everyday explanation and assessment of action. This idea is operative when we say that John is in the habit of taking a walk before breakfast, that Mary goes to the movies every Friday evening with her friends, or that John routinely brushes his teeth before going to bed. This idea, however, is not easy to characterize.

On the most skeletal characterization, habit is an agent's disposition or propensity to do something in certain circumstances, a disposition acquired by having regularly done the same thing in similar circumstances in the past (Brett 1981: 363; Alvarez 2010: 187). If S is in the habit of a -ing in c , S is likely to undertake to a when circumstances c obtain.⁶ And we ascribe a habit only if the agent has already done the thing in question in a sufficient number of occasions in the past.

Just as ascribing a habit of a -ing in c entails a claim about the agent's past record of a -ing, a habit of a -ing in c is only ascribed if one has been regularly a -ing in *these* circumstances. If John has been regularly going for a beer after work, this does not suffice for ascribing him the habit of going for a beer after a day on the beach. This is because these circumstances account for the habit's manifestation on some occasion, so they are indispensable for habit's explanatory role. To explain why John is now rushing to the pub, we need to specify his habit in a way that includes mention of his present circumstances. This does not mean that circumstances always figure explicitly in habit ascriptions. They may be left implicit when they are too obvious in context, too diverse to be mentioned or too generic. Moreover, circumstances might be cited somehow obliquely: putting sugar in one's tea is the habit of putting sugar in one's cup in circumstances where one is making this cup of tea for oneself.

Thus a canonical habit explanation of an agent's a -ing on some occasion will mention her habit of a -ing in c and the fact that c obtained on that occasion. Or, if what needs to be explained is *why* S a -ed in c , it would suffice just to mention that habit. But in either case a habit explanation would not mention mental states, such as beliefs, desires ("He a -ed it because he wanted to b and believed that a -ing is a way to b "); nor it would mention the objective in view of which one did something ("He a -ed it because he was b -ing"). In other words, a habit explanation does not rationalize.

This does not mean that most of the things we do habitually do not serve any purpose, or that in acting habitually we do cannot be acting for a reason; we usually do. Otherwise habit would not be so indispensable to our everyday life. I think it will not be doubted that John's going for a beer, or his going for a walk before breakfast are things intentionally done, and the same holds for the various things we do routinely as we prepare to go to work. The agents have reasons to do these things, they know they do them for these reasons, they will be held responsible if on some occasion their so acting

⁶ Just as with other dispositions, habit does not necessitate its manifestation when the relevant circumstances obtain. Hence the modal force of a habit ascription is not that of a conditional 'If c obtain, S a -s', but is best conveyed by a habitual sentence: 'S a -s in c ' (Fara (2005) argues that this is the case with dispositions generally). However, to the extent that the idea of habit is obtained from our understanding of certain uses of habitual sentences, this claim does not amount to any theoretical advance.

was a bad thing to do. And it is clear our manifesting a habit is in some tangible sense up to us.⁷ Most manifestations of habit are typically amenable to rationalizing explanations. When I get dressed in the course of my working day morning routine, I am doing this because I am going to work, and this is the sense of “because” that signals the presence of reasons. This sort of rationalization is clearly compatible with a habit-explanation, and both kinds of explanation are typically available for the same act. Nevertheless, the rationalizing explanation is clearly more informative and thus preferable in most contexts.⁸

However, in certain cases habit-explanations are the only ones available. This is when the manifestation of habit is not something intentionally done. Habit can explain acts that serve no purpose of ours, or acts that are antagonistic to our objectives. When we say that one did something “out of habit” we sometimes mean that the agent had absolutely no reason to do them, not even a very weak or highly defeasible one. This is the case where one sets off to visit a friend, but finds herself driving to work instead, just because she absent-mindedly follows the most familiar route. Habit relieves us from having to consider each time anew what to do in familiar circumstances and how to do it, allowing us to think about more important matters while engaged in daily activities. It is this absence of conscious deliberative guidance of habitual activity that accounts for the fact that we may do things we have no reason to do, or have reason not to do.

This brings us to another central feature of habitual action: its automaticity. The term ‘automaticity’, at least in its current use, originates in psychology, where the claim that manifestations of habit are ‘automatic’ is usually taken for granted (see for instance Neal and Wood (2009); the idea goes back at least to James (1981): ch.8)). Moreover, this claim is also central to the few discussions of habitual action in action theory (Pollard (2008): ch.3); Brett (1981); see also Ryle (1949): 42)). But what does it mean to say that manifestations of habit exhibit automaticity? This is not the place to expand on this notoriously multifaceted theoretical notion. I shall rely on the widely cited analysis of automaticity as a theoretical construct in psychology offered by Moors and De Houwer (2006, 2007).⁹ According to these and various other authors, the most promising way to articulate the idea of automaticity is by identifying its characteristic features. Among these are the absence of deliberation and (its issue) intention, diminishing awareness, diminishing requirements on attention, and diminishing sense of effort. For present purposes, we can understand these features as having either (i) a causal/explanatory import: the absence of intention and other mental states; or (ii) a phenomenological import: diminishing awareness, effort/attention.

⁷ Pollard (2006, 2008: ch.4) argues at length that manifestations of habit are typically intentional acts. The idea that manifestations of habit are typically things done for reasons draws significant support from the growing literature on automaticity and virtue (Snow (2009), for instance), as well as the literature on automaticity and moral responsibility generally.

⁸ On habit explanations, see Pollard (2006) and Alvarez (2010: 185-90). Alvarez says that habit explanations provide a ‘reason-why’ explanation, as opposed to providing the ‘reason for which’ or ‘in the light of which’ one acts. I think this is correct, but we should keep in mind that we do not usually explain manifestations of habit by giving a habit-explanation.

⁹ Other well-known discussions of the idea of automaticity as a theoretical construct in psychology are Bargh (1994), and Saling and Phillips (2007). I find the discussion of Moors and De Houwer more illuminating, if only because they consider the implications of the causal/explanatory aspect of automaticity for action-theoretic discussions, especially in their (Moors and De Houwer 2007).

In philosophy pages, the feature that seems to be more prominently with automaticity is (i). Wayne Wu, a proponent of the standard story, has recently emphasized the importance of current conceptions of automaticity for certain problems in action theory. Wu stresses that the predicate ‘is automatic’ applies to action specifications, not to actions as such. The specifications under which an action is intentional are those under which it is “controlled”, and control is contrasted with automaticity. Hence, Wu writes: “[O]ne intentionally F’s iff one’s behaving in that way is caused by one’s intention to F (in the right way). Similarly, automaticity is acting in a way not as one intended” (Wu 2015: 4). On the same vein, Moors and de Houwer (2007: 22–25) express the view of many psychologists when they claim that a central criterion for whether an act is automatic or not is whether it is intentional or not, and that an act is not intentional when no pertinent intention is part of the sufficient cause of the action.

Critics of the standard story have appealed to the contrast between the causal operation of automaticity and the operation of mental states in order to argue that the standard story cannot account for fact that habitual acts can be intentional and automatic at the same time (Pollard 2008: 55–56; Di Nucci 2013: ch.2–3). Some proponents of the standard story seem to accept this consequence, denying that habitual acts are intentional (Wu 2015: 106). However, other proponents of the standard story want to resist this counter-intuitive result. In what follows I shall examine their proposals.

The phenomenological features of automaticity are also central to habitual action. Psychologists often nod in agreement to William James’ claim that “habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed” (1981: 114). This point is also emphasized in several recent philosophical works (Pollard (2008); Romdenh-Romluc (2013)).¹⁰ And in everyday life, when we say that one did something “absent-mindedly” or “out of habit”, we also seem to imply that the agent was not fully aware and did not pay sufficient attention to what she was doing. I shall come back to this below.

Thus the absence of causal explanation in terms of mental states and diminishing attention seem to be the most prominent features of the automaticity of habitual acts. This is suggested by the pre-theoretical practices of habit explanations, as much as by psychological work on the idea of automaticity. I should stress, however, that by pointing to these features I do not mean to supply necessary conditions, much less a definition, of habitual acts.¹¹ On the approach of Moor and De Houwer, different combinations of these and other features constitute different *kinds* of automaticity. But here I do not need to make any assumptions about the specific kind of automaticity exhibited in habitual acts; different sorts of habitual acts might exhibit different combinations of features. Nor do I need to concur with philosophers and psychologists who believe that habitual action invariably exhibits automaticity, of some kind or other. The idea of habit, as it figures both in pre-theoretical discourse and in the history of philosophy, is so multifaceted that any such claims are contestable. For present purposes, however, we may safely disregard these questions. The problems for the standard story will be no less pressing if *some* habitual acts exhibit the absence of intention in their causal ancestry and diminishing attention,

¹⁰ Various philosophers have considered the relation between attention and habit. But we must keep in mind that “habit” and “attention” are used in very different ways. When habit is construed as a genus that encompasses bodily skills, the claim that habit dispenses with attention is highly questionable.

¹¹ Pollard (2008) proposes a specific interpretation of these two features, and uses them to provide a definition of habitual acts.

even if not all of them do, and even if different sorts of habitual agency exhibit different combinations of additional features of automaticity.

3 Habit and Basic bodily Skill

Habit and bodily skill are similar in that they both rely on forms of automaticity established by habituation. Indeed, many authors use “habit” or “bodily habit” when talking about bodily skill.¹² However, in the present context it is important to distinguish between the two. For we shall see that these give rise to quite different sorts of problems for the standard story.¹³

We saw that habits have the same explanatory role as reasons for action: they explain why the agent did something on some occasion. By contrast, a skill ascription does not explain *why* an agent did something. Being skilled at playing the lyre is not by itself a reason to play now. Skill ascriptions address questions of technique, method or the way of doing something; this is why they are usually considered near-equivalents to knowing-how ascriptions. They likewise explain *how* an agent manages to do something, whence their affinity to ascriptions of capacities, as opposed to habitual propensities to do something in certain circumstances.

Consider one’s working day morning routine. One gets out of bed, makes a cup of tea, goes to the bathroom to shave, then gets dressed. The agent has a reason to do each of these things: she is getting ready to go to work. All these things an agent does bear instrumental relationships to each other, and the answer to the corresponding “Why?” question gives the reasons for which the agent does what she does. Conversely, a series of “How?” questions can be answered to specify the agent’s means. When an agent is making tea in the course of her morning routine, the automaticity of habit will not only account for *why* she is doing that, but also about her taking certain steps or means (boiling water, etc.). Thus the automaticity of habit may well be operative with respect to the means taken, specifying answers to the “How?” question. It follows that the general form of a habit specification, “*a*-ing in *c*”, can take the form of “*a*-ing when *b*-ing”, since one’s objectives can also create circumstances in which one takes the appropriate means. Putting sugar in one’s tea is no less a habit than having tea with breakfast. And going to work by taking a certain route can likewise be a habit. This does not conflict with the point that habit ascriptions address only the “Why?” question. Where *a* and *b* are teleologically ordered specifications of the same action, any “How to *a*?” question corresponds to a “Why to *b*?” question, and so on.

However, a standard assumption in action theory is that not all answers to the “How to *a*?” questions will specify the agent’s means. They will not do so when *a*-ing is basic.

¹² This use of “habit” is found in William James (1981: ch.4), as well as in many latter psychologists. Merleau-Ponty (1945): 166–172), as well as contemporary action theorists (Pollard 2006, 2008; Velleman 2007: 139), similarly use the etymological variants of *habitus* indiscriminately. This use has a venerable philosophical history, habit and skill being two species of the traditional category of *habitus*.

¹³ For different accounts of the distinction between habit and skill see Ryle (1949); Annas (2011). These accounts differ in important respects from the account sketched here. The following paragraphs sum up aspects of an account of the distinction I develop elsewhere. Here I only describe some aspects of this distinction rather than defend it, because I merely want to sharpen the terms involved in the arguments below. I do not think anyone will disagree that there *is* a distinction between habit and basic bodily skills, even if its exact formulation might be a matter of dispute.

Tying one's shoelaces is (usually) basic in this sense. Writers on basic action almost invariably suppose that basic acts are exercises of bodily skills: the things one does without taking any means.¹⁴ We may thus say that a basic act is an exercise of a *basic* bodily skill. (The point of doing this is to fend off the suggestion that *all* exercises of bodily skills are basic acts. The differences between kinds of skills raise different sorts of problems for the standard story, but here I shall set these aside).

Thus habit accounts for relations between acts at the basic level or above, or between circumstances and acts, whereas basic bodily skill accounts of relations between basic and sub-basic acts (things are actually a bit more complex, but this simplification is harmless for present purposes). The claim that habit and skill exhibit automaticity implies that these relations are not set on the basis of deliberation. Since actions are manifestations of habits or exercises of skills only under some specification, it is clear that an action can be habitual under some specification and an exercise of a basic skill under some other (we saw that the same holds for 'is automatic', as well as for the features of automaticity). What may not be that clear is that the same act may be an exercise of a skill and a manifestation of a habit at the same time, as for instance when one ties one's shoelaces in the course of one's morning routine. Habit accounts for *why* one did this (she is going to work), whereas bodily skill accounts for *how* she did it, that is, for her capacity to make the required bodily movements.

4 Automaticity and the Standard Story of Action

Given the causal-explanatory commitments of the standard story, the automaticity of skilled and habitual activity raises at least two sorts of problem.

The first concerns subsidiary actions (Ruben 2003 ch.4; Valaris 2015). Skilled and habitual activities comprise various components. Just like the various things one does in exercising a skill, such as the movements made in tying one's shoelaces, manifestations of habit, such as the various things one does in her morning routine, ensue from the operation of automaticity. Hence the proponent of the standard story would have to say either that these are not intentionally done (this seems to be Wu's reaction), or else postulate a multitude of mental states as their causal antecedents. In the latter case, the standard story will be open to Ruben's charge that it "overpopulates" the mind with mental states. This problem might not be so pressing in the case of basic bodily skill; some authors would allow that the sub-basic things done in exercising a basic skill are not intentionally done. But this is hard to swallow with respect to things done in the course of habitual activity. As I have explained above, there are important considerations that speak in favour of taking the things one does in one's morning routine to be intentionally done.

Critics and proponents of the standard story have been mainly concerned with the problem of subsidiary actions. But since both sides do not pay attention to the differences between habit and bodily skill, the fact that this problem is more poignant in the case of habitual activity is not sufficiently appreciated. However, here I am concerned with a different sort of problem, a problem that arises only in the case of habitual acts and activities.¹⁵ We saw that the automaticity of habit does not merely

¹⁴ This holds for proponents (Enc 2003) and opponents (Hornsby 2005, 2013) of the standard story alike.

¹⁵ This is more akin to the problem discussed by Pollard (2006). But Pollard's argument is muddled by his failure to distinguish between habit and bodily skill.

account for the fact that one may do a sequence of things during one's morning routine. It also accounts for one's coming to engage in a routine, or a simple action for that matter. This is just to repeat that habit addresses as "Why?" question: it explains why one came to do something, as opposed to *how* she does it, which is the problem of subsidiary actions. One does not usually ponder whether or why to get ready for work on a workday morning. One just gets out of bed and starts to do things. And one does not usually pause to wonder why to pick up the phone when it rings. Here it is the whole activity, or the 'main' action, which is explained by habit without appeal to the causal mediation of a mental state.

One way to bring out the difference between the two problems is this. Suppose I wake up and head for the bathroom to rinse my face. My doing this is accounted by the automaticity of habit, and how I do it (by this or that bodily movement) is accounted by the automaticity of basic skill. In this case, the action of my rinsing of my face is not causally related to a mental state under *any* specification. It follows that according to the standard story this event is not a manifestation of agency at all. By contrast, in the case of subsidiary acts the whole activity is agential because there is supposed to be an overarching intention, and the problem concerns only the status of its components as intentional acts.

In what follows I am going to consider some possible replies on behalf of the standard story.

5 Replies on Behalf of the Standard Story

I start with the problem of subsidiary actions, since it is relevant to some points I make below. Proponents of the standard story would reply that this objection assumes that one intentionally *a*-s only if one has an intention to *a*. (The Simple View). But most proponents of the standard story would claim that one intentionally *a*-s only if she has some intention, but not necessarily one figuring *a* in its content.

Suppose that I decide to tie my shoelaces. The various things I do, say pulling that loop that far, do not causally ensue from an intention to pull that loop. Still, they do ensue from my intention to tie my shoelaces, albeit in a somehow indirect manner. An intention activates a sub-personal process that is responsible for the guidance of lower-level aspects of the action. But since the whole process is causally generated and sustained by the overarching intention, I intentionally pull that loop. Clarke (2010) provides a comprehensive reply of this kind to the problem of subsidiary actions raised by Ruben (2003), and outlines the main options available to the standard story regarding how this reply can be developed.¹⁶ Notice, however, that whatever the plausibility of the claim that one pulled the loop intentionally, this is not the strong

¹⁶ The objections raised below apply to various forms the standard story, but I shall simplify things by formulating these objections so as to address Clarke's preferred version, outlined above. It is a good question how sub-personal explanations relate to explanations that appeal to automaticity. Although the idea of automaticity is central to Clarke's paper, he has no much use for the term, so it is hard to tell what is his view on the matter. I will suppose that sub-personal explanations are explanations that invoke some kind of automaticity. Sub-personal states are not the objects of intention (barring unusual scenarios) or the focus of attention and awareness (barring unusual scenarios). However, I do not assume that all explanations that involve the broader idea of automaticity are sub-personal explanations.

sense of “intentionally” that requires its figuring in the content of intention and its being subject to rationalizing explanations. Let us dub the things done which indirectly ensue from an intention in the way outlined above *indirectly intentional*.

Valaris (2015) has exposed a problem for Clarke’s reply. The intention that activates the sub-personal systems that control what is done in exercising a skill may cause at the same time all kinds of sub-personal and overt or covert physiological processes to occur. For example, the intention that causes an exercise of a bodily skill would at the same time cause an increase of one’s heart rate and blood flow. These do not figure in the content of intention, but neither do the detailed movements made in exercising skill. Thus, once a proponent of the standard story rejects the Simple View, she has removed any meaningful restriction on what can be intentionally done.

However, even if Clarke’s reply did work, it would not address the second problem above. Manifestations of habit, whether in simple things done or complex routines, need not ensue from a mental state at all. The problem in such cases was that the automaticity of habit *initiates* the activity, so there is no mental state to initiate a sub-personal process, and by dint of which the various acts comprising the habitual activity are (indirectly) intentional. Clarke is clearly aware of this problem, and has provided a line of defense. A man’s habitual shaving each morning, says Clarke (2010: 526), “[i]s doubly routine: routinely engaged in, and unfolding in a routine manner when it is underway”. So “doubly routine” actions cannot be accounted in the same way as subsidiary actions. Clarke attempts to accommodate them as follows:

Sam’s policy of shaving each workday is itself a type of future-directed intention. Sam has reasons for having this intention. He has a standing desire to look clean-shaven on workdays, and he has the standing belief that, in order to have that look, he has to shave. Sam adopted and maintains this policy for these reasons.

Given that Sam has this policy, each workday when he finishes breakfast, he acquires a present-directed intention to head to the bathroom and shave. On a given day, Sam needs no further instrumental belief that, now that he has finished breakfast, the way to implement his policy is to head to the bathroom sink; as a matter of habit, he simply acquires the intention when he finishes breakfast. It would not be irrational of Sam to also acquire the belief, but it is unnecessary, and Sam’s head is not cluttered with unnecessary beliefs (Clarke 2010: 527).

The idea here is that Sam has an intention with general content, an intention to do something whenever certain circumstances obtain. (Clarke actually speaks of “policies”. I am going to consider policies in Section 8). This general intention generates present-directed intentions on relevant occasions, and does without thought or deliberation, since this would require instrumental beliefs. And latter in the paper Clarke stresses that on the standard story agents might not be “consciously aware of their intentions” (Clarke 2010: 544). So it seems fair to say that these intentions and their formation satisfy central features of automaticity. The habitual character of Sam’s coming to shave is presumably accounted by the automatic way in which these intentions are generated. Notice that, by dint of these automatically generated intentions, habitual acts are intentional, not merely *indirectly* intentional. This is necessary to

account for habitual acts that are not part of any larger activity, as well as one's engaging in some habitual activity to start with.

Helen Fridland makes a similar move to account for the intentional character of habitual action:

Moreover, it would seem that habitual actions are often performed as a result of automatic intentions. For example, I can intend to brush my teeth as I approach my bathroom sink in the morning but that intention is often formed in what seems to be an automatic way—it is triggered involuntarily, it does not require consciousness or explicit attention, it is robust to stressors, etc. But it is an intention all the same. After all, I don't brush my teeth accidentally (Fridland *forthcoming*: 9).¹⁷

Thus the proponents of the standard story might try to accommodate the above problem by claiming that the automaticity of habit operates at the level of intentions. These present-direct intentions causally initiate and sustain the action, and thus the agent acts intentionally.

In the following three sections I am going to identify three different problems for this proposal.

6 Automatic 'Intentions'

One of the hallmarks of habitual acts is a distinctive kind of mistake, *habitual action-slips*. This is the case of the absent-minded driver who takes a turn leading to his workplace, instead going straight to his friend's house, as she has earlier decided to do. In the literature it is generally agreed that what we causally call "absent-mindedness" to make sense of habitual action slips is understood as a failure of attention.¹⁸ Habitual action slips are a consequence of the fact that the automaticity of habit dispenses with our need to pay attention to what we are doing and why. This may lead us to do what we usually do in these circumstances (take the turn when reaching it) without taking account of the fact that our goals on the occasion are different (one has arranged to visit his friend).

We saw that the expressions "absent-mindedly" or "out of habit" are often used when we want to explain how an agent came to do something she has no reason to do, she had not decided or intended to do—or indeed decided *not* to do. In using these expressions we imply that had the agents just paid sufficient attention, had it occurred to them that what they are doing is not conducive to their objective, they would have adjusted their course of action accordingly. Crucially, habitual slips are not due to a lack of knowledge, weakness of will, repressed motives, or some kind of failure in the

¹⁷ Fridland is not in the business of defending the standard story. But the inference from the claim that one does not brush her teeth accidentally to the claim that this must be done "as a result of automatic intentions" would be a *non-sequitur* unless the truth of the standard story is assumed. Fridland argues that the operation of automaticity does not preclude the manifestation of intelligence in action. So while I am sympathetic to the concerns of that paper, I think that a lingering adherence to the standard story makes Fridland's objective impossible to achieve.

¹⁸ For discussions of habitual action slips see Elian and Roessler (2003: 4); Roessler (2003: 388–389); Enc (2003: 154); Wu (2011: 63); Annas (2011: 101ff.). For a more extensive treatment see Toner et al. (2015) and Romdenh-Romluc (2013); Amaya (2013). Reason (1990) is the standard reference in psychological literature, but discussion of such slips goes back to William James (1981: 119).

exercise of one's rational capacities.¹⁹ The driver might not have any reason to take the turn at all, not even a weak one. He just failed to think about his course of action when required, and the automaticity of habit led him astray. Thus it is clear that habitual action slips are not things intentionally done: the driver took to the road to his workplace unintentionally, though of course his action was intentional under more proximal specifications (e.g. 'turn left here'). Pretty much anyone who has considered habitual action slips agrees on this point.

According to the standard story, the content of intention is a plan. The content of the driver's intention to go to his friend is a plan that includes a route. The same holds for automatically generated intentions that are supposed to initiate, sustain and guide habitual activity. Indeed, the passage from Clarke quoted above continues as follows:

Each workday, Sam shaves intentionally. And as the [standard story] has it, Sam's having a present directed intention to shave generates and guides his shaving. This is a crucial part of what makes the behavior intentional action.

The content of the intention in question is a plan for shaving. It is the plan that Sam routinely follows when he shaves, one that represents, for example, his dispensing the shaving cream, repeatedly pulling the razor along the surface of his face, rinsing the razor every few strokes, and so forth (Clarke 2010: 527).

Now if habits invariably generate intentions the content of which is a plan, then what is habitually done is always intentional. For no one doubts that, causal deviance aside, if *a*-ing ensues from an intention figuring *a* in its content, then one is *a*-ing intentionally. However, habitual action slips are not things intentionally done. So they cannot figure in the plan content of intention. The idea of habit allows that its manifestation runs against what the agent is meant to do or decided—*intends*—to do on some occasion. The expression “out of habit” often indicates precisely such discordance. But the idea of intention does not allow for such discordance. Notice, moreover, that habitual action slips can occur in simple actions, which are not part of some habitual activity: I have resolved not to pick up the phone—I want to finish that paper—but I grabbed it as it rang “out of habit”.

It follows that the sorts of things done that can be explained by habit cannot be explained by the idea of automatically generated intention. For habit may be manifested in unintentionally *a*-ing, but an intention to *a* cannot cause one to unintentionally *a* (barring deviance). This suggests that the causal sources of habitual acts cannot be genuine intentions. Regarding how things stand with the agent, there is nothing in the case described that differentiates it from the usual case where one is meant to go to work. It is only the broader context that is different: it is not a working day morning, but a lazy Sunday afternoon.

A proponent of the standard story might reply that what habitual action slips show is that habit sometimes generates (present-directed) intentions that are not conducive to one's objectives on the occasion. They do not show that habit does not generate intentions at all. But I do not think this helps. Most proponents of the standard story accept some version of Bratman's (1987) claim that both present-directed and future-directed intentions are subject to 'rational constraints': an intention has to be consistent

¹⁹ See Amaya (2013) for how slips are to be distinguished from other kinds of mistakes in action.

with the agent's other intentions, as well as with the agent's beliefs. Adherence to such constraints is part of the functional role of the kind of mental state an intention is, and is central to the rationale for conceiving intention as a *sui generis* mental state (desires, for instance, are not subject to these constraints). But in the case of habitual slips, the postulated automatic 'intentions' clearly flout both requirements. For the agent's operative 'intention' is at variance with her decision to go to his friend. And one can come up with examples where automatically generated 'intentions' are inconsistent with one's beliefs: the driver might take the familiar route to work, while knowing full well that it is closed down for maintenance. (This is not to deny that agents can have intentions, instrumental or otherwise, that are incoherent with their objectives, or inconsistent with their beliefs. One might intend to take the wrong turn or form incoherent intentions because of a false belief, an invalid inference, wishful thinking, or some other failure in the exercise of rational capacities. But this is not the sort of case under consideration. Habitual action slips do not ensue from lack of knowledge or any failure of rationality, but from a failure to engage one's rational capacities when required).

This is not the only respect in which automatically generated 'intentions' are unlike genuine intentions. In the passage quoted Fridland says that these 'intentions' have salient features of automaticity: they do not ensue from deliberation but are "triggered involuntarily"; nor do they require consciousness or "explicit attention". Clarke also implies that these intentions are not formed on the basis of deliberation, and that the agent is not necessarily aware of them. And we saw that, these 'intentions' are not subject to constraints of coherence with other intentions and beliefs. But once the idea of intention has been stripped of these features, all we are left with is the idea of a particular that is the causal antecedent of habitual acts. We are asked to suppose that this particular is (under some specification) a personal-level mental state, and that in the course of our daily habitual activities, we "simply acquire", to use Clarke's phrase, countless such mental states, each of which causes the component habitual acts.

These theoretical manoeuvres make all the harder for the standard story to fend off the charge that the postulation of these automatically generated mental states is ad hoc, and that this sort of 'intention' is merely an ersatz mental item.²⁰ The question is why we should accede to all these manoeuvres, given that the idea of habit, as a propensity to do things in direct (non mediated by mental states) response to circumstances, can naturally explain all that needs to be explained in the sorts of case under discussion. This already suggests that the stipulation of such 'intentions' in the present context does not have much dialectical force. And when we take into account that automatic intentions cannot account for the existence of habitual action slips, we can see that all this theoretical manoeuvring rests on very thin ground.

7 A Dilemma for the Standard Story

These observations point to a different sort of problem for the idea of automatic intentions. Once one starts to postulate intentions that are not subject to the usual constraints of intention attributions, it is not easy to see where to stop. Suppose we

²⁰ The criticism that the standard story postulates mental states too liberally is found in Ruben (ch.3) Pollard (2006); Di Nucci (2013): ch.3).

ascribe intentions with respect to all the things I do in the course of my morning routine, say shaving, dressing, put my shoes on, then tying my shoelaces. Why is it not the case that automatically generated intentions trigger and sustain each and every finger movement made in tying my shoelaces? Why is it not the case that an intention is not operative with respect to each key I press in typing “action”? Why not with respect to each segment of these movements? Once the usual constraints in the ascriptions of intention are lifted, there seems to be no principled way to limit the number of intentions ascribed to account for even simple bodily acts.

The proponent of the standard story would try to address this problem by appeal to her conception of basic acts. For a skilled typist, typing “action” is basic. So she can do this on some occasion without taking any means, in which case the component finger movements do not need corresponding (instrumental) intentions in their causal history. On that occasion they are sub-basic things done accounted by a sub-personal process exhibiting some form of automaticity. Hence they do not ensue from instrumental intentions, but are only *indirectly* intentional.

However, appeal to the idea of basicness leads to the converse problem. If no intentions are operative with respect to the finger movements when I type a word or tie my shoelaces, why are intentions operative with respect to my tying of my shoelaces itself, my putting of my shoes on, and so on for whole morning routine? The fact that automaticity is operative with respect to all of these likewise precludes the causal operation of (instrumental) intentions. It follows that one’s working day morning routine, driving to work via a familiar route, and one’s early office routine can all be basic. Indeed, a proponent of the standard story might have a hard time to explain why all of these are not a *single* basic act, if one is guided throughout by the automaticity of habit. The composite acts figuring in habitual activities, like getting dressed when getting ready for work turn out to be on a par with sub-basic things done, such as the finger movements involved in typing “action” on an occasion where one exercises her typing skills.²¹ (Of course, we might discern temporally disjoint events in which these activities consist. But then we might discern distinct finger movements when typing “action” on the keyboard). It is not be the case that the agent is getting dressed because she is going to work, in the sense of “because” that signals rationalization. It turns out that is no difference between the instrumental structure of complex habitual activities and whatever internal structure might exist in basic acts. Which is to say that, given the definition of basicness favoured by proponents of the standard story, both are devoid of instrumental structure.²²

In short, the standard story faces a dilemma between two equally unattractive extremes. On the first horn the things done in the course of habitual activity are not subject to rationalizing explanations and habitual activity lacks any instrumental structure. The proponent of the standard story may try to avoid this conclusion by

²¹ Here I assume that both the whole habitual activity and one’s writing “action” ensue from an overarching intention. Of course, in the previous sections I argued that there is no reason to assume this, at least in the case of habitual activities. But here I am concerned with a different problem.

²² This suggests that Clarke is not entitled to the idea of a skilled activity as composed of instrumentally related subsidiary *acts*. In the absence of causation by intentions there is nothing to provide for their status as (distinct) acts in the first place; they are merely sub-basic things done (see Valaris 2015 for related concerns). The claim that these are indirectly intentional does not help, for *any* stretch of skilled bodily activity is indirectly intentional to the extent that it is guided by sub-personal processes activated by an overarching intention.

claiming that these are suitably caused by automatic intentions. But this is a kind of ‘intention’ the ascription of which is not subject to any of the usual constraints. So now she faces the second horn, since she cannot explain why an indefinite amount of such ‘intentions’ is involved not merely in complex habitual activities, but in the simplest bodily acts. In either case, complex acts comprising a habitual activity are on a par with low-level sub-basic things done, and the difference between exercising of simple bodily capacities and engaging in extended habitual activities drops out of view.

8 Policies and General Intentions

The proponent of the standard story might object that in the previous sections I overlooked an important aspect of Clarke’s account: the origins of the present-directed ‘intentions’ that are the supposed causal antecedents of habitual acts. On the passage quoted above Clarke suggests that what accounts for Sam’s acquiring of this present-directed intention to shave is his policy of shaving each working day morning. This policy is “a type of future directed intention”, an intention with general content that is itself acquired for reasons: Sam wants to look clean-shaven on workdays.

Clarke takes the idea of a personal policy from Bratman (1987, 1989). Policies, especially what Bratman (1989: 458) calls “situation-specific policies”, have several features that make them suitable to play the explanatory role of habit. Bratman (1987: 87; 1989: 445) says that policies are “general intentions”: a policy is not directed to a particular occasion, but can figure in the aetiology of an indefinite number of “policy-based” present-directed intentions. Bratman gives the example of the policy of buckling up one’s seat belt when driving. Moreover, policies are defeasible in the same sense that habit is: one might opt to not act on a policy on some occasion (Bratman 1989: 455–61). The notion of policy as such does not imply the operation of automaticity. However, Bratman hints at this idea when says that policies save us “from having to go through the same reflections on many different future occasions” (Bratman 1989: 452). Similarly, we saw that Clarke implies that Sam does not form the policy-based intention to shave on the basis of deliberation. Thus habitual acts are causally generated by present-directed intentions that are themselves generated automatically, by a special kind of intention (a policy) with general content: to be doing something whenever certain circumstances obtain.²³ The idea is still that habit operates at the level of intention-acquisition, but what we ordinarily call “habit” should be replaced with “policy” when theorizing about human action.

The suggestion I would like to consider is that the claim that these present-directed intentions are policy-based helps the standard story to alleviate the worry that they are nothing but ersatz mental states. An explanation of why an agent formed the present-

²³ We should distinguish the claim that habit gives rise to present-directed intentions from the claim that habit often operates at the level of thought, that is, in the formation of future-directed intentions. Habit might function as a reminder of what to do in the circumstances at hand, without manifesting itself immediately in action. One’s habit of going to the opera each Friday does not preclude one’s forming a future-directed intention, on a Friday afternoon, to go to the opera tonight. This is not the kind of case at issue here, however. Notice also that the proposal under consideration does not concern the claim that present-directed intentions need not ensue from future-directed ones. This is the case of spontaneous action, which does not seem to require an intention with general content.

directed intention to *a* on some occasion where *c* obtain, which mentions his policy of *a*-ing in *c*, suggests that forming that policy based-intention is a rational response. And since general intentions or policies are held for reasons, and reasons on the standard story are belief-desire pairs, general intentions might serve to explain how the causal ancestry of habitual things done figures mental states which also rationalize them—if somehow indirectly. If so, the present directed-intentions that generate habitual activity do not come out of the blue: the claim that they are policy-based implies that are integrated with the agent's practical thought, and explains why habitual things done express the agent's preferences and values.

It is hard to say whether, and if so how exactly, a suggestion on these lines could help with all the problems identified in the previous sections. For one thing, it does not seem to speak to the problems arising from habitual action slips. However this may be, the idea that habitual action ensues from policy-based intentions creates more problems than it solves (if it solves any). The problem is that the idea of a general intention or policy does not explain all that need to be explained, leaving mysterious how manifestations of many habitual acts are intentional.

First, people have many self-admittedly bad habits, and are often in the grip of a habit they are trying to break with. Sam wants to avoid putting sugar in his tea for the sake of his health, or wants to drive in an energy-efficient manner on ethical grounds. Bad habits can hardly be called general intentions or policies—at least as long as the agent repudiates them. Policies are adopted and maintained for reasons, and as such express our values and preferences. But this is not true of self-admittedly bad habits. Still, such habits may well explain why an agent acts as she does. Something has to explain Sam's unthinkingly reaching for the sugar, or his pressing hard the accelerator, and it seems only the idea of habit does. And surely, in doing these things Sam may well be acting intentionally, even though he has no corresponding general intention or policy. So the notion of personal policies can hardly cover all the explanatory ground of the idea of habit.

Second, we do not have the same epistemic relationship to our habits as we have to our mental states. Sam is in the habit of shaving his right cheek first, but he might never be aware of having that habit, he did not form it as a result of deliberation, nor he has any particular reason to do this. Habits can be acquired inadvertently, and even though Sam may well know that he is now shaving his right cheek and that he will then proceed to shave the other side, he need not have realized that he is in the habit of doing so. Further, agents will often fail to be aware of habits that verge on, arise from or express, negative character traits. Sam may be interrupting too often his interlocutor, or he may be too quick to dismiss the political views of his girlfriend. As Pollard (2006) argues, habits lack the characteristic first-person authority of mental states. But intentions, general or otherwise, are products of the agent's making up her mind, express normative commitments, and hence are paradigm cases of mental states with first-person authority.

Thus the claim that habitual action is intentional by dint of ensuing from policy-based present-directed intentions implies that the things done in the sorts of case mentioned in the previous paragraphs are not intentionally done. So far from helping with the problems identified on the previous sections, appeal to the idea of policy and policy-based intention invites new problems for the standard story.

9 Conclusion

Have discussed the objection that the standard story of action cannot accommodate the intentional character of things we do in the course of skilled and habitual activities. I started by providing some additional support to the claim that the things we do habitually do not bear the right causal and explanatory relations to mental states. This is suggested by the way we explain habitual acts in ordinary life, by the availability of habit-explanations in cases where the agent's mental states do not rationalize the act, by the phenomenology of habit, as well as by current conceptions of automaticity in psychological literature.

The authors who have followed this line of criticism to the standard story do not adequately distinguish between habit and skill. I have suggested that this is important in order to understand the differences between the various, if related, problems that these present to the standard story. So I have presented some essential aspects of the distinction between habit and basic bodily skill. Once this distinction is in place, we can formulate an objection that pertains specifically to habitual acts. Then I have explored a line of response of this objection on behalf of the standard story. This turns on the idea of an automatically generated intention.

I have identified several kinds of problems with this kind of response. It cannot explain why certain habitual acts are intentional when they are, as in the case of manifestations of a habit that the agent either repudiates or is not aware of. And it cannot explain why habitual acts are unintentional when they are not, as in the case of habitual action slips. Moreover, it assimilates the sub-basic things done in exercising a basic bodily skill to things done in the course of habitual activities. These problems indicate that the idea of habit explains aspects of human behaviour that cannot be explained by the idea of intention.

Given the pervasiveness of the automaticity of habit in human life, this is already a serious problem for the standard story. But to leave matters there would be to underestimate the extent of the challenge posed by the broader idea of habit. My focus on this paper has been limited to the sorts of things that we would call habitual or routine in our everyday explanation and assessment of action. However, we must keep in mind that the human propensities and capacities that have traditionally been associated with the idea of *habitus* are very diverse, and that the pre-theoretical use of "habit" captures only a fraction of them. One hardly needs to point out that *hexis* or *habitus*, as well as the associated idea of (social) practice, are central to questions that range from ethics to the philosophy of language. This is not the place to enumerate the topics in which the idea of habit under its various guises makes a central appearance. If anything, the precise relationships between habit, skill, virtues, character traits, practices and related notions is a complicated issue, and even "habit" itself and its etymological variants have come to acquire a variety of quite distinct meanings in the hands of philosophers. Still, it is worth bearing in mind that the philosophical legacy of the idea of habit extends to so many areas that the above problems for the standard story might be only a permutation of more wide-ranging problems raised by the broader idea of habit for currently dominant conceptions of mind and agency.

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