

Habit-Formation: What's In a Perspective?

Some of the most famous and influential parts of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2012)¹ are the passages in which he discusses habit. In them, he makes two related claims:

- 1) Forming a habit constitutively involves a change in the habit-bearer's perspective;
- 2) There are two perspectival changes constitutive of habit-formation:
 - (a) new opportunities for action are both made available to, and salient for, the habit-bearer;
 - (b) the items the habit-bearer is habituated to using become incorporated into their body schema.

The basic idea behind (1) is that when someone forms a habit, their doing so is intimately linked to their subjective perspective on things, and that habit-formation somehow alters this perspective. (2) is Merleau-Ponty's gloss on *how* a person's perspective is altered by habit-formation.

I think that (1) is a keen insight, and will argue that it is very plausible in light of considerations about the *force* of habit. However, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's case for (2) rests on a serious mistake: he wrongly conflates habit with skill. Therefore, although (2) is a claim about habit-formation, it is primarily shaped by considerations of skill-acquisition. This undermines his account considerably. However, rather than try to develop a better case for (2), which my argument gives us reason to be sceptical of, I will argue for a different view of the matter:

- 3) The change in a person's perspective constitutive of their forming a habit of doing something, *A*, in certain sorts of contexts, *C*, is that the person comes to be, and feel, familiar with *A*-ing in *C*.

The idea is that the correct account of how (1) is true must appeal to the fact that particular courses of action, in particular sorts of contexts, become *familiar* to a habit-bearer through the process of habit-formation, and this familiarity is revealed by the habit-bearer's experience of those courses of action in those contexts as being familiar. Therefore, the aims of this paper are twofold. The first is to shed light on both an important insight and significant mistake in Merleau-Ponty's work. The second is constructive, in that I will develop a view that builds on Merleau-Ponty's insight and elucidates important features of habit and habit-formation.

The paper is split into three sections. In Section 1, I argue that there is ample textual support that (1) and (2) are Merleau-Ponty's own claims, and I argue that there are powerful considerations in favour of (1). In Section 2, I show that Merleau-Ponty wrongly collapses the intuitive distinction between habit and skill, and that recognising this undermines (2). In Section 3, I motivate and defend my solution, (3), which has habit-bearers' familiarity with courses of action at its centre.

¹ All unaccompanied page numbers are to the (2012) edition.

Section 1

To begin with, it will be helpful to explain what (1) means. The idea is that a part of what it is for someone to form a habit is for some feature of their subjectivity to alter: they may gain a new sensitivity to already existing facts, or to those fact's practical salience; there may be shifts in what they attend to or care about; or they may gain new reasons or motives for action. (1) says that habit-formation constitutively involves some such change in a person's point of view.

It may be helpful to compare this with more familiar views, for example, John McDowell's (1979) discussion of virtue-acquisition. McDowell's idea is that acquiring a virtue like kindness constitutively involves an alteration in the newly-kind person's point of view on the world and what is required of them (McDowell, 1979, pp. 331–332). Certain facts, such as that a stranger needs help, now stand out to them as reasons to do things; their perceptual experience has a new epistemic status, perhaps 'gilded and stained' with peculiarly moral phenomenology.² McDowell is therefore articulating a view of virtue-acquisition analogous to the view of habit-formation in (1).

When we look at the *Phenomenology*, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty endorses (1). He begins his first major discussion of habit by saying that:

“Every mechanistic theory [of habit] runs into the fact that the learning process is systematic: the subject does not weld individual movements to individual stimuli, but rather acquires the power of responding with a certain type of solution to a certain form of situation. [...] Situations and responses resemble each other in the different cases much less through the partial identity of elements than *by the community of their sense*.” (p.143, emphasis added)

Here, Merleau-Ponty is claiming that habit-formation involves linking certain kinds of behaviours to certain sorts of situations, such that those situations elicit the related behaviours. Alice may have a habit of running in the morning; Sally may have a habit of biting her nails when she is bored; Bert may have a habit of singing in the shower. In each case, there is *what* one is in the habit of doing and the types of *contexts* in which one's habit is manifested.³ Merleau-Ponty's thought is that these linkages between types are not to be found in descriptions of environments and actions specified in an extensional vocabulary whose terms have no cognitive significance for the habit-bearer. Rather, the linkages between types is found in the 'community of their sense'; in some shared meaning certain types of contexts and certain types of action have for the habit-bearer. Partly constitutive of habit-formation is a change in the agent's perspective on the *meaning* or practical *significance* of the context and what one does in it.

Next, Merleau-Ponty says that:

“The body, as has often been said, ‘catches’ (*kapiert*) and ‘understands’ the movement. The acquisition of the habit is surely the grasping of a signification, but it is specifically the motor grasping of a motor signification.” (p.143-144)

² See Audi (2010), Dancy (2010), and McDowell (1985).

³ See Douskos (2019a) for discussion.

Here, Merleau-Ponty connects the forming of a habit to the *understanding* of the thing one has become habituated to doing, and says that habit-formation involves a special, practical grasp of a practical significance. The claim that habit-formation is the understanding of a kind of practical meaning clearly commits Merleau-Ponty to (1), since gaining such an understanding counts as a change in the habit-former's perspective.

Finally, in a discussion of perceptual habits, Merleau-Ponty says that "the analysis of motor habit as an extension of existence continues, then, into an analysis of perceptual habit as an acquisition of a world. Reciprocally, every perceptual habit is still a motor habit, and here again the grasping of a signification is accomplished by the body" (p.154). This is further evidence that Merleau-Ponty thinks that habit-formation constitutively involves changes to a person's perspective on things; their coming to grasp the significance of activities and situations they have become habituated to.⁴

So there is good textual support for thinking Merleau-Ponty believes (1). But the thesis is also very plausible. For one thing, habit is at the centre of a rag-bag of broadly 'dispositional' kinds of mental property, including (amongst other things) virtues, vices, and character traits. It is eminently plausible that acquisition of each of these other properties constitutively involves changes to one's perspective. Virtues make one sensitive to the moral salience of facts; a vice like arrogance makes one overconfident in one's own abilities; a character trait such as shyness puts one in a state of emotional vulnerability, making social situations intimidating and off-putting. In each case, it is natural to think that an analogue of (1) is true. But if habit is at the centre of, and conceptually connected to, this class of properties, it would at least be rather strange if it were the odd one out in *not* constitutively involving a change in the habit-bearer's perspective.

Further, and more importantly, the existence of the force of habit requires thinking that habit-formation constitutively involves changes in one's perspective.⁵ The force of habit is a psychological phenomenon which, somewhat like desire, draws habit-bearers to do what they are in the habit of doing. For example, think of Bert, who has a habit of sitting in a particular armchair in the evening. He could sit on the sofa, but he is drawn by force of habit to his usual seat. The other options are relegated from consideration by the force of habit; only the armchair occupies Bert's thought about where to sit. And if someone else sits there, then Bert may feel the distinct dissatisfaction that accompanies not being able to do what one usually does. Even if the sofa is more comfortable, the force of Bert's habit implicates the small pleasures that come with sitting where he usually does, and the small pains of not being able to. If anything is constitutively involved in habit-formation, it is the force of habit. And that is a feature of the habit-bearer's perspective and practical orientation.⁶

⁴ This is even clearer when we remember that the sense of 'world' in the passage is broadly Heideggerian – to acquire a world is to grasp the systematic practical and normative relations between aspects of one's environment (Heidegger, 2015, pp. 115–122). See (p.115, but especially p.131-132).

⁵ Talk of 'the force of habit' is riddled throughout the literature (Brett, 1981; Carlisle, 2006, 2014; Douskos, 2018; Owens, 2017; Pollard, 2003, 2006; Ryle, 1970). My discussion is intended to capture what is meant by the phrase.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty's own arguments for (1) are rather different. They occur in the first two sections of *The Structure of Behaviour* (1963), which he alludes to at (p.143). I have chosen not to defend (1) with Merleau-Ponty's own arguments because, if I am right that he systematically conflates habit and skill, it is likely that his own arguments for (1) suffer the same problem. Therefore, it would be dialectically inappropriate for me to rest my case for (1) on those arguments.

However, once we accept (1), a question arises: exactly *how* does one's perspective change when one forms a habit? Indeed, this is just the question Merleau-Ponty poses: "The acquisition of the habit is surely the grasping of a signification, but it is specifically the motor grasping of a motor signification. *But what exactly does this mean?*" (p.144, emphasis added). Immediately after asking this, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to one of the most famous passages in the *Phenomenology*, where he discusses the way that a woman with a feather in her hat "senses where the feather is, just as we sense where our hand is" and thereby avoids damaging it passing through doorways, the way that someone who possess "the habit of driving a car" can pass through a lane "without comparing the width of the lane to that of the fender, just as I go through a door without comparing the width of the door to that of my body" (p.144). Further, he discusses how a blind person becomes habituated to using their cane (p.144), and how "the power of habit" is drawn on in typing (p.145), playing an instrument (p.146-147), and dancing (p.148).

The fact that this extended passage immediately follows Merleau-Ponty's question indicates that we might find his answer in it. And when we study the passage, a plausible interpretation of his answer emerges: the twofold change in a person's perspective constitutive of their forming a habit is (a) new opportunities for action are both made available to, and salient for, them; (b) the items the habit-bearer is habituated to using become incorporated into the habit-bearer's body schema. That is, Merleau-Ponty believes (2). I will now unpack this interpretative claim.

The immediate lesson Merleau-Ponty wants us to draw from considering the be-hatted woman, the driver, and the cane-using blind man is that when we have learned to use tools like hats, cars and canes, our grasp of their spatial proportions, and the spatial properties of their movements, is not intellectual. The driver need not *compare* the width of the fender with the width of the lane; the woman need not *judge* the distance between her feather and the door frame; getting used to a cane "has nothing to do with" *comparing* it's length with the distance of the goal to be reached (p.144). Instead, Merleau-Ponty thinks that our grasp of the spatial dimensions of these items is the same as our grasp on the spatial dimensions of one's own body, which is accomplished by the body schema. This Merleau-Ponty argues, is an essentially *practical* rather than theoretical way of grasping the body's spatial structure (p.142-143; p.155; p.172).⁷ This is (2b).

A related lesson Merleau-Ponty wants us to learn is that new opportunities for action become both available and salient to a habit-bearer. The driver can enter a lane and "see that 'I can pass'" (p.144). And when one gets used to a cane, what one does is try to touch objects with it, and find out from this exercise what the reach of the cane is, which provides one with the ability to tell which objects are within reach (p.144; p.153-154). Further, Merleau-Ponty thinks that since one need not know the exact location of each key to be a habituated typist, a part of what it is to be so habituated is to have a "motor-space [which] stretches beneath my hands" whereby the locations of the keys are understood practically, rather than known theoretically (p.145). Therefore, one has a sense of how to type the word one is reading in the manuscript even without the theoretical knowledge of the keys' locations; the opportunity for action is open, available, and salient to one given one's project of typing the manuscript and one's habit.

⁷ See Gallagher (1986, 1995) and Halák (2018) for discussion.

Again, the idea that possibilities for action, and their salience, is what marks out a habit-bearer's subjectivity crops up in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the organist who practices on an unfamiliar organ before recital:

“During the rehearsal – just as during the performance – the stops, the pedals, and the keyboards are only presented to him as powers of such and such an emotional or musical value, and their position as those places through which this value appears in the world.” (p.146-147)

The sense of ‘powers’ that seems most appropriate here is the sense in which the stops, pedals, and keyboards represent possibilities for the organist's musical expression; opportunities relevant to his playing music. Merleau-Ponty's idea is that partly constitutive of the organist's habit is that he both *has* these opportunities, and that they appear to him as such.

Finally, there are Merleau-Ponty's remarks on phantom limbs:

“At the same moment that my usual world gives rise to habitual intentions in me, I can no longer actually unite with it if I have lost a limb. Manipulable objects, precisely insofar as they appear as manipulable, appeal to a hand that I no longer have.” (p.84)

Although Merleau-Ponty here speaks of ‘habitual *intentions*’, he is arguing that partly constitutive of having a habit is for certain things to appear manipulable to one, where manipulability is the property something has in virtue of which it is *possible* to manipulate it. Once again, Merleau-Ponty is connecting having a habit with possibilities for action and their salience. The sad irony of the phantom limb is that the changes to a person's perspective that are constitutive of their having a habit often persist even after the amputation of a limb, so that items like pencils and mugs of tea *appear* manipulable even though they are not.

The forgoing suggests that Merleau-Ponty thinks that (2a) is true. Therefore, there is substantial textual evidence that Merleau-Ponty accepts both (1) and (2). I have also argued that (1) is very plausible, and therefore an answer to *how* habit-formation alters one's perspective must be given. However, in the next section, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's own view is seriously undermined by a significant mistake.

Section 2

In this section, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty conflates habit and skill, and that this seriously challenges his account of habit-formation. I will proceed in three steps: firstly, I argue that Merleau-Ponty collapses the natural distinction between habit with skill; secondly, that this is a mistake; thirdly, that this mistake undermines (2).

We can see that Merleau-Ponty's collapses the intuitive distinction between habit and skill by reflecting on his examples. For instance, he talks of “learning the habit of a certain dance” (p.143) and of drivers as people “with the habit of driving a car” (p.144). But these are odd choices for a

discussion of habit. What one learns in learning a dance, say the tango, is *how to tango*. It at least seems possible for someone to learn how to tango, and yet not be in the habit of tangoing. For example if they went to a few classes and picked up the basic steps, retain the ability, but rarely dance. And ‘the habit of driving a car’ is not something that obviously applies to all drivers. Intuitively, the phrase picks out a habit that people who like to go out for casual drives have, but not all drivers have *that* habit.

We see something similar in the fact that Merleau-Ponty introduces his discussion by saying that when someone forms a habit they acquire “the power of responding with a certain type of solution to a certain form of situation” (p.143). But again, intuitively, this looks like a description of the formation of an ability to do something, a skill which one can exercise in coping with certain kinds of situations. However, one can acquire a skill of *A-ing* without forming a habit of *A-ing*.

So, whilst we naturally distinguish between habit and skill as two different kinds of thing, Merleau-Ponty seems to see no distinction here. He treats what we would usually think of as skills under the rubric of ‘habit’, and sees no problem in talking about habit-formation as the acquisition of ‘a power of responding with a certain type of solution to a certain form of situation’, which we would usually reserve for describing skill-acquisition. What seems to be a genuine difference in kind is treated as no difference at all.

Now, collapsing or denying intuitive distinctions is not in itself wrong. However, doing so requires justification, especially when the distinction seems robust as it does here. Therefore, the burden of proof is on Merleau-Ponty to argue that we should not distinguish between habit and skill. Unfortunately, though, there is no evidence of an argument in his text. This gives it the air of a mistake, and, as such, something we have *prima facie* reason to reject.⁸

However, Komarine Romdenh-Romluc has defended Merleau-Ponty’s treatment by arguing that he can capture the intuitive distinction without recognising a difference in kind. She argues that we can think of habits and skills as lying on a spectrum on which habits are the result of a greater quantity of repetition than skills. Therefore, it may be the case that “I have knitted a sufficient number of times to be a skilled knitter, but I do not knit enough to be in the habit of knitting” (Romdenh-Romluc, 2013, p. 13). The intuitive difference between habit and skill, Romdenh-Romluc claims, can be captured by this quantitative difference. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty can have his cake and eat it: he can treat habit and skill in the same way *and* respect our intuitions.

But this cannot be right. Firstly, it is false that all habits involve a greater quantity of repetition than skills. Some skills take a thousand hours to acquire, whilst some habits may take

⁸ It has been suggested to me by an anonymous reviewer that this way of putting things is somewhat anachronistic, because much of the philosophical work Merleau-Ponty would have been educated on also treats habit and skill either in the same, or very similar ways, for example, Félix Ravaisson (1838/2008), Albert Lemoine (1875), and Maine de Biran (1802/1970) (although see Sinclair (2019, Chapter 2) for a reading of Ravaisson on which the distinction between habit and skill is marked fairly clearly). The suggestion is that, even if it is right to distinguish habit from skill, there was not a clear intuitive distinction in Merleau-Ponty’s own time, so, in a way, there was no intuitive distinction for *him* to collapse. Now, this explanation of why Merleau-Ponty says what he does is likely correct, and that somewhat softens my charge against him: we are all philosophers of our time. However, it is worth noting along with Douskos (2017) that many contemporary discussions of habit still make the same conflation. So it is not as if the distinction is more prevalent among, or obvious to, contemporary philosophers than it was to Merleau-Ponty. The key is to recognise that the distinction between habit and skill has remained unintuitive *to philosophers*, even though it is an integral (and, I have argued, completely appropriate) part of our ordinary thought about agency.

minutes. Think of the difference between acquiring the skill of flying a plane, as opposed to the habit of mispronouncing a new friend's name.

Secondly, the intuitive distinction is not purely quantitative, so cannot be captured in the suggested way. One of the non-quantitative aspects of the distinction is that skills are evaluatively gradable whereas habits are not (Douskos, 2019b). For Alice to be a more skilled runner than Bert is for Alice to be a *better* runner than Bert. However, to be more habituated to running is not to be better at running – it is to have a stronger tendency to run.

Further, the intuitive distinction commits us to the existence of a force of habit, but no force of skill. As I argued earlier, the force of habit can be thought of as a psychological force, somewhat like a desire, which draws one to do the habitual thing. However, there is no analogue in the case of skill; there is no psychological force which plays a role in maintaining one's skill by drawing one to exercise it over again. Many people have what athletes and musicians call 'motivation' or 'passion' which drives them to improve. However, it is a sadly familiar truth that someone can be incredibly skilled and yet lack the drive to improve themselves. So where habit comes packaged with the force of habit, there is no force of skill.

This leads on to the final aspect of the distinction between habit and skill which is not quantitative. Habits figure in explanations of why people act, when they do so habitually, whereas skills do not. In general, this explanatory point is quite clear: if asked why I make silly faces at babies in the park, I may refer to a habit of doing so; I could not refer to a skill of doing so.⁹ Similarly, to the question 'Why do you always play the Take Five melody whenever you pick up a guitar?', my answer will be 'I have formed a habit'. My guitar-playing skill has no particular explanatory role in explaining *why* I play that tune when I pick up the guitar. The role it plays is helping explain *how it is possible* for me to play anything difficult on the guitar *at all*. Without the skill, I could not play the Take Five melody, but it is not the skill which explains *why* I play that melody when I do. Rather, it is a precondition of any explanation of why I play anything on the guitar. And that means it is a precondition of the explanation of why I play that melody, where the latter explanation appeals to my habit. This explanatory point is connected to the one about the force of habit: since the force of habit is a motivational force, its operation is part of the explanation of why habit-bearers do what they do, when they act out of habit. The force of habit therefore partly accounts for why we see an explanatory difference between habit and skill.

I think these arguments show that the intuitive distinction cannot be captured quantitatively as Romdenh-Romluc suggests. However, they are also powerful positive reasons to think there is a significant qualitative difference between habit and skill which cannot be ignored – they are different in *kind*. So Merleau-Ponty is not right to collapse the intuitive distinction; rather, he is mistakenly conflating two things which must be given different accounts.¹⁰

⁹ This runs against Christos Douskos's (2019b, 2019a) claim that skills can figure in explanations of why people act. I do not have space to respond to Douskos's arguments here, so I will simply register my disagreement.

¹⁰ Although Merleau-Ponty is often presented as discussing skills, for example in Romdenh-Romluc (2013), Sachs (2014, p. 102), Dreyfus (2002) and Morris (2012, p. 66), the point I am making is that he *conflates* habit with skill. Mark Sinclair comes the closest to making this point when he argues that "Merleau-Ponty is so little concerned with the nature of acquired habits that it can even be said that his reflection on *l'habitude motrice* is not really a discussion of habit. It is merely a reflection on skill acquisition" (Sinclair, 2019, p. 85).

This is obviously a difficulty in itself. However, it also causes a significant problem for Merleau-Ponty's account of habit in (2), according to which the perspectival change constitutive of habit-formation has to do with the availability of new possibilities and the incorporation of tools into the body schema. The problem is this: once we have the distinction between habit and skill firmly in mind, we can see that Merleau-Ponty's discussion applies much more appropriately to skill-acquisition than it does to habit-formation. It is totally right to say that part of what it is to acquire a skill is to develop one's sensitivities to practically relevant features of the environment so that they become salient to one. This is one of the reasons that accounts of skill inspired by Merleau-Ponty have enjoyed such traction in recent debates (Dreyfus, 2002, 2007; Romdenh-Romluc, 2011, 2013). Indeed, it is common ground between virtually all contemporary accounts of skill precisely because it is rightly seen as an essential component of the phenomenon.¹¹ Further, Merleau-Ponty's idea that becoming a skilled tool-user involves incorporating the tool into one's body schema is also a central part of recent research on tool-use and bodily cognition (de Vignemont, 2007, 2018; Maravita & Iriki, 2004).

Because he does not recognise the distinction between habit and skill, Merleau-Ponty makes use of these insights about skill in his account of habit. But viewed naively, this is just the ascription of skill's properties to habit on the basis of a mistaken identity claim. Thought of this way, Merleau-Ponty is like someone who wrongly thinks Lois Lane is Superman and who, when trying to describe Lois, says she can fly. Merleau-Ponty takes habit as his subject, and proceeds to an acute analysis of skill, before stating the result as a conclusion about habit. Since this is how he arrives at (2), the support for that view is significantly weakened. Why should we think that (2) correctly characterises habit-formation when the argument for it depends on mistakenly identifying habit with skill?

But we must be careful. This argument undermines (2), but does not give us grounds for actually *rejecting* it. Rather, it leaves us with no positive reason to believe it. Perhaps there are independent reasons for accepting it which do not rely on conflating habit with skill. Rather than considering this possibility, given I have undermined (2)'s basis without showing that it is false, I propose to simply put it to one side and withhold judgement.

In lieu of arguing against it, then, I propose to argue for a different view of the perspectival change constitutive of habit-formation, one which centres on the fact that habit-bearers are and feel familiar with their habitual courses of action. This view is not incompatible with (2). If one had independent reasons for believing (2), one could easily combine them. So the view I will defend in Section 3 is not strictly speaking an alternative to Merleau-Ponty's. However, it is my hope that it will render (2) unnecessary, and so apt for rejection. Despite this hope, officially my position from here on in is one of agnosticism about (2)'s truth.

Section 3

I have argued that Merleau-Ponty's account of the change in a person's perspective constitutive of their forming a habit is weakened by the fact that his argument for it depends on the

¹¹ For example, see Bäckström and Gustafsson (2017), Douskos (2019a, 2019b), Fridland (2013, 2014, 2017, 2019), Pavese (2016), Ryle (1970), Small (2017), and Stanley and Williamson (2017).

wrongful conflation of habit with skill, and that this suggests we may benefit from looking for a different account of the relevant perspectival shift.

In this section, I want to motivate and defend such a view. What we need to do is identify something which changes in agents' perspectives whenever they form a habit, and which has plausible claim to being partly constitutive of habit-formation. Now that we are starting from scratch, it may not be obvious what feature of habit-bearers' perspectives may play the role. However, I think that one feature is quite distinctive: in forming a habit, one becomes *familiar* with doing what one is forming the habit of doing, and one becomes familiar with doing it in the contexts in which usually does it. Moreover, typically, one will come to *feel* that *A-ing* in that type of context is familiar to one. Therefore, I want to suggest the following account of habit:

- 3) The change in a person's perspective constitutive of their forming a habit of doing something, *A*, in certain sorts of circumstances, *C*, is that the person comes to be, and feel, familiar with *A-ing* in *C*.

I think (3) is a powerful and elegant account of the perspectival change constitutive of habit-formation, but to see this requires thinking carefully about the nature of familiarity. Therefore, I will discuss a number of aspects of familiarity which allow it to play the role that (3) gives it.¹²

Firstly, I will start with a distinction. There is a difference between something's *being* familiar and its *seeming, looking, sounding, or feeling* familiar. For something to be familiar to someone, they must have engaged with it somehow: to be familiar with London, one must have walked its streets and drunk in its pubs; to be familiar with a person, one must have spent some time getting to know them. Familiarity is gradable, so that I can be more familiar with London than Athens, and less familiar with jazz than blues. Also, although one can become familiar with something or someone in a number of different ways, some of these have a certain priority. I am a little familiar with Naples having read Elena Ferrante's wonderful (2015) novels, but my familiarity with it is both far less extensive than Ferrante's herself and has a different source. Similarly, a spy may become familiar with their target. But their familiarity is different from, and more degraded than, the familiarity the target's friends have with them. This suggests that there are proprietary ways of becoming familiar with different types of items, and that familiarity admits of something like Bertrand Russell's (1911) distinction between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance.

On the other side of the distinction, there is the feeling of familiarity. The feeling of familiarity is connected to our perceptual recognitional capacities. Matthew Ratcliffe nicely brings this out in an example of a person who notices someone smiling and waving at them in the street. Seconds later it dawns on them that it is a close friend: "[T]he whole experiential structure changes and takes on an air of familiarity as the face's significance is registered; 'It's him!' Without that sudden reorientation, perhaps he would remain unfamiliar, unrecognised" (Ratcliffe, 2004, p. 39). These cases where recognition washes over one are a nice way to bring out the distinctive

¹² Now, Merleau-Ponty does mention familiarity in passing during his discussions of habit (p.145-146; p.153), and it does appear in other places in the *Phenomenology* (in often illuminating ways as I will turn to later). See for example (p.131-132; p.201; p.288; p.293-294). However, I do not think there is any evidence that Merleau-Ponty holds the view I am advocating here, even if he does see that familiarity plays some role in habit.

phenomenal character of the feeling of familiarity, however there is no reason to think they are the only cases. Instead, it is plausible that it mostly sits in the background of experience, making that to which we are repeatedly exposed seem normal, and making things which deviate from the norm come to seem alien or strange.

The distinction between being and feeling familiar with something invites the question of how they are related. Now, experience may mislead, as Ratcliffe's example shows: a familiar person may remain unrecognised. And in *déjà vu*, an unfamiliar scene may appear familiar. However, despite the existence of bad cases, it is most plausible that the feeling of familiarity typically serves to reveal which things are familiar; in feeling a familiar thing to be familiar, we 'register its significance' (where 'register' is naturally understood as factive). The existence of bad cases should not undermine the claim that the feeling can and does reveal the familiar, just as the fact that an excellent basketball player misses some free-throws does not undermine the claim that they can and do often succeed (McDowell, 2010, p. 245).

Now, my discussion of what's involved in being familiar with something suggests that familiarity with *A-ing in C* is constitutively connected to habit-formation. This is because the proprietary way one becomes familiar with *A-ing in C* is the same as the way one forms a habit of *A-ing in C*: one *A-s* (typically repeatedly) in instances of the context-type *C*.¹³ Therefore, whenever one has formed a habit, it is necessary that one also have become familiar with doing the habitual thing in the relevant type of context. So there is a necessary connection between the habitual and the familiar. Moreover, this connection mediates a connection between the habitual and the feeling of familiarity, since the feeling of familiarity serves to reveal what is familiar under that aspect. This strongly supports (3) because it means that the view identifies a perspectival change which bears a constitutive connection to habit-formation, which is exactly what we need.

Now, it should be clear enough that when one becomes familiar with something and comes to feel familiar with it, this is a change in one's perspective. After all, the claim that something comes to *feel* or *look* familiar is explicitly couched in terms of a person's experiential point of view. And if I am right that the feeling serves to reveal what is familiar, then one's familiarity with something is also implicated in a perspectival shift. However, it may seem that what has *really* changed in one's perspective is that one now has experiences which reveal things as being familiar, and that *actually becoming familiar* with something should not be thought of as a change in one's perspective, but rather a change in the world which one's perspective opens onto.

But I want to resist this because I think that being familiar with something has an intimate connection with certain kinds of 'practical knowledge', such that it too counts as an aspect of one's perspective. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty himself makes this connection nicely:

“When I move about in my house, I know immediately and without any intervening discourse that to walk toward the bathroom involves passing close to the bedroom, or that to look out the window involves having the fireplace to my left. [...] For me, my apartment is not a series of strongly connected images. It only remains around

¹³ The minimal requirement on both habit-formation and familiarity-formation is that one have *A-ed in C* at least once before. I can become familiar with calling my new friend Sue 'Sally' after doing it only once, and thereby form a habit of doing so. However, it is typically the case that some degree of repetition is required for habit- and familiarity-formation. Thanks to an anonymous referee for asking me to clarify this.

me as my familiar domain if I still hold ‘in my hands’ or ‘in my legs’ its principal distances and directions, and only if a multitude of intentional threads run out toward it from my body.” (p.131-132)¹⁴

This passage connects one’s knowledge of the house’s layout, one’s knowledge of how to get around it, and one’s familiarity with it. The connection with knowledge is perfectly apt: a part of what it is to *be* familiar with the house is to know how to get around it with ease, find what one needs, and so on. This connection with knowledge indicates that becoming familiar with something is itself a change in one’s practical knowledge, and therefore one’s perspective.

There is a further indication of this: what I am familiar with is my home’s layout, where this is adequately described only by mentioning the items that make it up by employing a vocabulary of terms which I myself recognise as applying to the room, such as ‘desk’, ‘sofa’ and ‘window’.¹⁵ There is, however, a way of describing my home’s layout which uses the vocabulary of physics, which describes the arrangement of atoms, electrons, and forces. It is plausible that these are descriptions of the same thing: the house’s layout.¹⁶ However, in saying I am familiar with the layout, we cannot mean I am familiar with the arrangement of atoms, electrons, and forces. That is not how my home is presented to me, and I know nothing of it. Therefore, we must say I am familiar with my home’s layout as the spatial and functional arrangement of items like desks, sofas and windows, and not as the arrangement of atoms and forces.

But this is an intension-introducing-‘as’, since the case shows that ‘*S* is familiar with the *F*’ is a referentially opaque context from which we cannot infer that ‘*S* is familiar with the *G*’ even if the *F* is the *G*.¹⁷ Now, this suggests that ‘*S* is familiar with the *F*’ describes the thing which is *F* as having a particular cognitive significance for *S* – that *S* is familiar with it as *an F*. This explains why we cannot substitute ‘the *G*’ into the sentence *salva veritate*. Therefore, for something to be familiar to *S*, it must have a cognitive significance for them as being of some particular kind. For example, the layout is familiar as *the spatial and functional relations between furniture*; a person is familiar as *a friend*.

Therefore, although there is a distinction between being familiar with something and experiencing it as familiar, it is not only the experience which forms part of one’s perspective on the world; becoming familiar with things is also a change in one’s perspective, since it makes those things cognitively significant. This is important because it means that (3) really identifies two different, but systematically related, ways in which habit-formation changes one’s perspective.

The final thing I want to argue in support of (3) is that it gives us an elegant account of the force of habit. If so, this is an especially attractive feature because the existence of the force of habit was one of the things that made (1) plausible in the first place. It seems to be a sort of psychological motivational force which draws people to do the habitual thing in relevant types of context.

¹⁴ See Heidegger (2015, pp. 143–144), and Wittgenstein (1958, p. 182) for similar passages.

¹⁵ Thanks to Matt Cull for a helpful discussion of the following argument.

¹⁶ To clarify: this is not the claim that they are descriptions of the same thing because desks and windows *are* atoms and forces. That is false. The latter plausibly *constitute* the former, and constitution is not identity. Rather, the claim is that there are two descriptions of *the room’s layout*, one in an everyday practical vocabulary, and one in the vocabulary of physics. For if atoms and forces constitute desks and windows, then, given that desks and windows form the room’s layout, so do the atoms and forces. See Johnston (1992, 2006) for very sophisticated discussions of related issues.

¹⁷ See Golob (2014) for extensive discussion of the ‘*a as b*’ structure of intentionality.

Therefore it is the result of a shift in the habit-bearer's perspective, and one that is distinctive to habit-formation. Since we are trying to say what the change in a person's perspective constitutive of habit-formation *is*, and this is the result of such a change, it would be especially promising if (3) could give us an account of the force of habit.

My case for the claim that it does begins by arguing that being familiar with doing something gives one a reason to do it, and that the feeling of familiarity reveals this reason. Clare Carlisle has best described the connection between being familiar with doing something and having reasons for doing it.¹⁸ As she says, there is a "sense of comfort, safety and ease that is engendered by familiarity" which contributes to "[insulating] us from the threat of the unknown" (Carlisle, 2006, p. 23). Carlisle argues that this is why "even during a week away one finds a regular haunt: the café one returns to each morning [...]. In combining the novel with the familiar they [...] make one feel at home in a new place" (Carlisle, 2014, p. 78). The point is that there is a kind of safety and ease in doing what we always do – the familiar paths through places we often find ourselves in are well-trodden, and, in contrast with courses of action that we are unfamiliar with, are vouched for by one's own history. Take one of Carlisle's examples. When I am away on a trip, because I go to the same café each morning I know what it's like there and what to expect. There are other cafes, and I can see that they seem nice. But they are places that I could be surprised by, and so represent something of a risky alternative to my consistent haunt. Therefore, my familiarity with my usual place grounds a reason to go there – the reason is *that it is familiar to me*.

If the fact that *A-ing* is familiar to *S* is a reason for *S* to *A*, then if *S* feels that *A-ing* is familiar, *S*'s experience reveals a fact which is a reason for *S* to *A*. But as Carlisle is at pains to point out, the experience of *A-ing*'s being familiar is not affectively neutral: it is often the sense that *A-ing* would be the easiest, safest option; that it would be 'homely'. Putting these two things together, we can see that the feeling of familiarity reveals a reason in a peculiarly motivational light, the kind of light that could make the revealed fact a motivating reason for *S*.¹⁹ In this respect, the feeling of familiarity is somewhat like other emotions. If Sally fears a bear, then the bear seems dangerous to Sally, and its dangerousness is presented in an affectively loaded way, such that it has a motivational role for Sally: her fear presents her reason to run as a reason to run (Poellner, 2016). The same thing can be said of the feeling of familiarity: it presents *S*'s reason for *A-ing* as a reason to *A*.²⁰

This is what provides the account of the force of habit. Since being familiar with doing something gives one a reason to do it, and the feeling of familiarity reveals this reason as a reason, feeling that doing something is familiar thereby draws one to do it because it presents one with a reason for action as such. This captures the idea that the force of habit is a psychological phenomenon which motivates one to act, and it does so by identifying the force of habit with the

¹⁸ Carlisle seems not to distinguish between being and feeling familiar, but I intend to use her claims to make a point about the former. Amelie Rorty also nicely describes familiarity's reason-grounding force at (Rorty, 1980, p. 210).

¹⁹ For discussion of motivating reasons, see Alvarez (2010), Dancy (2000). See Döring (2007) for a link between motivating reasons and affective experience.

²⁰ Now, Carlisle somewhat neglects the fact that the familiar can feel stale, monotonous, or boring. This can make it seem like it is only when the familiar is presented in a broadly positive light that it can attract one to act. But I think that is wrong. Whatever the exact affective 'valence' of an experience of familiarity with a course of action, the experience reveals a reason to do that thing, and reveals it as a reason *just in virtue of representing it as familiar*. So the motivational light I spoke of is not to be found in the particular affective quality of any given feeling. Rather, it is found in the type of feeling it is and that it represents courses of action as familiar.

feeling that the habitual thing is familiar to do. This promises to elucidate the ‘inner structure’ of the force of habit, something we have little independent grasp of, in terms of the notions of familiarity and the feeling of familiarity with the habitual course of action. Further, it explains why the force of habit exerts a motivational influence on habit-bearers: it presents them as having a reason to act, the reason is presented in an affectively loaded way, and therefore the reason is typically motivationally potent. Therefore, the force of habit can figure in explanations of why someone with a habit of *A*-ing in *C* *A*-s habitually in an instance of *C*: it does so because it is the presentation and appreciation of a reason for action, and that reason explains why the agent *A*-s. This is what allows habits and the force of habit to figure in explanations of why habit-bearers act when they do so habitually.

I think that the arguments in this section significantly support the view that (3) gives the correct account of the perspectival change constitutive of habit-formation. I have argued that both familiarity and the feeling of familiarity are constitutively connected to habit-formation and that they are both aspects of a habit-bearer’s perspective. Further, I have argued that they give us an elegant account of the force of habit, which also elucidates how and why habits have the explanatory role they do. This makes (3) a powerful account of the particular way that habit-formation changes one’s perspective.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of habit contains a deep tension: it is structured by both a fundamental insight and a significant mistake. The insight is that partly constitutive of habit-formation is a change in the habit-bearer’s perspective, understood very broadly. However, Merleau-Ponty’s own view of the nature of this change is made problematic because his case for it depends on a conflation of habit with skill. This leaves us with the task of making good on the insight, which I have tried to do by providing an account of the perspectival change that is rather different from Merleau-Ponty’s, an account posed in terms of habit-bearers’ familiarity with habitual courses of action and the feeling of familiarity that reveals it. I have argued that this elucidates the force of habit, habit’s explanatory role, and that there is a constitutive connection between habit and familiarity. Although this view is not Merleau-Ponty’s own, I think it has something of the same spirit: it articulates the fact that habits are not brutally external to habit-bearers’ own perspectives in terms of one of the many ‘intentional threads’, familiarity, which ties habit-bearers to the world.²¹

²¹ I want to thank Andrea Blomkvist, Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, and an anonymous reviewer for reading drafts of this paper and making comments which have improved it very much. I also want to thank Helen Steward for many very helpful discussions on this material, and Matt Cull for helping me work through an argument in Section 3. I have benefitted greatly from presenting this material at the *Sheffield Philosophy Graduate Seminar* and the *Northern Phenomenology Network*. Finally, I need to thank Tyler Haddow, who I met at the *BSHP Habit in the History of Philosophy* conference, and whose paper inspired me to pursue and develop the account I offer here.

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