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Habitual agency

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It is often maintained that practical freedom is a capacity to act on our view of what we ought to do and in particular on our view of what it would be best to do. Here, I discuss an important exception to that claim, namely habitual agency. Acting out of habit is widely regarded as a form of reflex or even as compulsive behaviour but much habitual agency is both intentional and free. Still it is true that, in so far as we act out of habit, we have no capacity to determine what we do by making a judgement about whether we ought to be doing it. Habitual agency is nonetheless free because we have the capacity to determine whether we act out of habit by making a judgement about whether or not the habit is a virtue. I develop this view of habit by contrasting habitual agency with action on policy and I argue that much virtuous agency is best understood as a form of habitual agency rather than as a form of action on policy.

Keywords: habit; intentional action; practical reason; decision; policy; virtue; intention

Some of what we do, think and feel is intelligible because we do, think and feel it from habit. In this paper, I'll focus on habitual action. I'll argue that one way to make sense of action is by observing that the agent is in the habit of behaving that way. To 'make sense' of an action is not merely to explain it: actions that make little sense can still be explained.¹ To make sense of an action is to explain it in a way that throws no doubt on its status as intentional activity.

Here is one account of what intentional action involves:

What marks intentional actions is that they are done because of what their agents believe the action is (including what it may bring about). That means that what the agents believe about the action leads them to do it, and guides their doing of it, all the way (that is, as far as that kind of action can be guided by its agent), and that suggests that they approve of the action, given what they believe about it. They so act because they approve of the action, and that in turn means that they think that it has some value, since value is what we approve of. (Raz 2011, 64)

Take a non-intentional action like the movement of my tongue. Moving my tongue is something that I do (unlike the beating of my heart) but I am normally quite unaware of what my tongue is doing and need see no point in its moving as it does. By contrast,

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when I intentionally move my tongue, the movement is guided by an awareness of what I am doing and, if Raz is right, I must see some point, some value in moving my tongue. It often matters to us whether we are acting intentionally because it matters to us whether our behaviour is an expression of our view of the merits of what we are doing. Even when we do what, on the whole, we think we ought not to be doing, the action is still intentional (in Raz's view) provided we see some merit in acting as we are.

Now consider a problematic case. A man is eating sawdust. Is he eating sawdust intentionally? How could he fail to be aware of what he is doing and guiding what he is doing by means of that awareness? Still Raz will ask whether our Sawdust Man sees any point in eating, sees any good in it. Our man probably doesn't believe that sawdust is either tasty or nutritious. Still he craves it and eats it because he craves it. Does that make sense of what he does? It would if he foresaw enjoying the sawdust. It would if he foresaw at least relief from his painful craving for sawdust. But suppose nothing like this is true, suppose he sees no point in eating sawdust. That would make Raz doubt that he could be eating it intentionally.

We've established that there is a difference between *explaining* a bodily movement and *making sense* of it. We've also introduced a possible account of this difference. A *rationalist* equates acting in a way that makes sense with acting *on a reason*. Broadly conceived, a 'reason' for ϕ -ing is a consideration that at least appears to offer some support to the judgement that you ought to ϕ and does so by recommending ϕ -ing.² Thus, you could arrive at that judgement by reasoning from the reason. A rationalist allows that you can intentionally ϕ without judging that you ought to ϕ because you ϕ -ed despite judging that ϕ -ing was, on the whole, a bad idea (i.e. you acted *akratically*). But, for your ϕ -ing to make sense, there must be a reason that *prima facie* recommends ϕ -ing in some respect and is in some way *connected* to your ϕ -ing, even if not via an all-things-considered judgment in favour of it. The most obvious mode of connection is that the agent's ϕ -ing is motivated by an awareness of the *prima facie* reason (by reasoning from the reason) but, as we shall see, this is not the only possibility.³

In the course of this paper, I shall examine various modes of connection between action and reason but I shall be confining myself to only one mode of recommendation. I shall focus on forms of rationalism (like Raz's) according to which a reason identifies a good, desirable or valuable feature of the proposed action. On this view, intentional action makes sense because of the (apparent) desirability of what is done. For such a rationalist, all rationalizing considerations (e.g. acting to fulfil a promise or to carry out a decision already made) must connect with what is good or desirable.⁴

I shall agree that to be intentional an action must be under the control of the agent's views about what is good or desirable but the rationalist is wrong to suppose that the agent must see some good in the particular action they are intentionally performing. Some people wear clothes in public and tell the truth even where they see no reason to do these things and even where there is no reason to be doing them. The fact that they are in the habit of doing these things is quite sufficient to render their choosing to do them intelligible and thus to ensure that what they do counts as intentional agency. To be a creature of habit (as we all are) is not to be a slave to instinct, drive or compulsion.⁵

Some terminology. *Actions* are forms of behaviour imputed to a whole organism, as when the organism eats sawdust or moves its tongue. I distinguish *intentional actions*, acts that make sense for the organism to perform from *non-intentional actions* that may be explicable but not in a way which renders them meaningful or intelligible. I distinguish *chosen acts*, acts one has performed as a result of thinking about what to do from *unchosen acts*, which one performs without any such thought. Finally, I distinguish acts that are the

product of *deliberation*, of thinking about what one *ought* to do from those performed without deliberation.⁶ Deliberated action is a subset of chosen action, chosen action is a subset of intentional action and intentional action is a subset of action. The point of these stipulations should become clear as the discussion proceeds.

1. Acting from habit

I'll begin with two examples of habitual action. In each, the protagonist is confronted with a choice and in each they make that choice without deliberation. I'm not saying that they fail to think about what *to do*; indeed the situation demands this of them. But they decide what to do without determining what they *ought* to do, without comparing the considerations that count in favour with those pointing the other way. Furthermore, they *couldn't* make this choice via deliberation so understood. Since, so far as they know, there is nothing at all to be said in favour of what they are doing, there is no deliberative route to the choice that they make. Yet, in each case, their choice and the action that flows from it might make perfect sense. They may intentionally do what they do.

Chris is walking towards a new beach his friends have recommended. As always, when prepared to swim, Chris is wearing his trunks. He arrives to find that most of the people on the beach are sunbathing naked. He faces a choice: should he join the great majority by stripping off? Chris has never stripped off in public before, whether on a beach or anywhere else. 'I don't go naked in public' he thinks and, out of habit, he chooses to remain clothed. Sarah is at a party and encounters the author of a book she has just finished. She rather imprudently lets on that she has read it and the author asks her what she thought of a chapter that, as it happens, she particularly disliked. Being unable to deflect the question, Sarah faces a choice. She could lie and save the author's face. On the other hand, she could tell the truth as tactfully as possible. 'I'm no liar' she thinks and then, as is her habit, she remarks that she had some reservations about that particular chapter.

The actions of Chris and Sarah appear straightforwardly intentional. Might that be because it is at least *possible* that there is some good in what they are proposing to do? Chris *might* avoid some social catastrophe by remaining clothed and by telling it how it is Sarah *might* redeem the author. But this is not why they do what they do. They act out of habit and not because they judge that some good just might come of it. In any case, if the bare possibility of a good outcome were sufficient to render their action intelligible, what behaviour would be unintelligible? After all, some good *might* come of eating sawdust.

My examples are pure cases in which habit is the only operative motive. It is helpful to focus on such cases when elucidating habitual action but habit rarely operates alone.⁷ Chris may anticipate greater embarrassment if he drops his trunks than if he doesn't but habit may be the main thing that keeps them on. And Sarah's custom of saying what she really thinks if asked a direct question is crucial to getting her to speak up, even if the hassle of devising a plausible lie has something to do with it as well. The rationalist might maintain that in these impure cases, Chris and Sarah's behaviour makes sense because habit motivates them *only given* that they see some good in what they do. The possibility of the pure case suggests otherwise. No appearance of the good is required to enable habit; habit is an independent motivational force.⁸

A rationalist can respond in various ways to these observations but before we come to grips with the main issue, I shall explain the notion of habit I am employing. In my mouth, 'habit' is cognate to 'custom', 'usage' and 'practice'. Here are three crucial features of a personal habit:

- (1) A habit of φ -ing is acquired by choosing to φ on a number of occasions.⁹
- (2) To φ from habit on a given occasion, I must not φ because I have on this occasion deliberated about the merits of φ -ing.
- (3) To φ from habit is, at least sometimes, to choose to φ and thus to φ intentionally.

I don't deny that things lacking one or more of these features are standardly called habits. I mean only to distinguish the habits that interest me from other psychological phenomena and, in particular, from what one might call *automatic routines*.

On a broader construal, a 'habit' of φ -ing is something like a tendency to φ which is acquired by φ -ing. So understood 'habits' need satisfy neither (1) nor (3). Several times a day, I probe a gap in my teeth with my tongue. This is something I find myself *doing* (O'Shaughnessy 1980, 60–62). Furthermore, I may be doing this because I did it in the past. In that sense, my action is 'habitual'. Nevertheless, such automatic tongue movements are unintentional.¹⁰ True I *can* choose to move my tongue (unlike my heart) but when I do choose to move my tongue, the movement is no longer part of an automatic routine. Furthermore, my acquisition of the 'habit' of tongue movement does not depend on my previously choosing to move my tongue because I saw some point in moving my tongue. Such routines can become established without any consideration of the merits of the movement. By contrast, the habits which interest us here were acquired because I (on several occasions) saw some point in doing the thing that I am now in the habit of doing and they do not exclude my now choosing to do the thing from habit.

Though the idea that habitual action is automatic has become entrenched among philosophers of action,¹¹ I doubt this reflects the scope of everyday usage, even among philosophers. When my department is proposing to appoint one of its own graduates to a permanent position, some might worry that we'll get into the habit of appointing our own students. Their fear is not that the department will appoint insiders without choosing to, as part of an automatic routine, but rather that we'll cease to consider the merits of outsiders. Appointing insiders as a matter of habit does not exclude appointing them intentionally. Normally, we act intentionally from habit without thinking about it, without making a choice, but I shall focus on habitual action that is obviously intentional in that it involves a specific choice. Chris and Sarah are confronted by something out of the ordinary: they are required to decide what to do. Even if they rarely consider whether to wear clothes or speak truthfully, they do here so consider.

2. The guise of the good

Are Chris and Sarah operating under the guise of the good? Is their behaviour intentional because they act in pursuit of some desirable objective? In this section, I'll ask whether an appearance of the good enters into the explanation of what they do. My aim is not to block all the moves open to an ingenious rationalist, to demonstrate that absolutely nothing could be said for the actions that Chris and Sarah perform. Rather I mean to contrast the difficulty of finding anything to be said for what they do with the fair certainty that it constitutes intentional agency and so to suggest that the latter need not presuppose the former.

Let's take Chris on the beach. Is there some good in his keeping his trunks on? Others have dropped theirs to get an all-over suntan, to fit in with beach custom, or simply as a pleasant change. What good could Chris see in keeping his on? He might anticipate feelings of embarrassment at being seen naked in public and avoiding embarrassment is clearly a good thing; then again he might not, being proud of his body. A different kind of person

would conclude that this is not worth worrying about and do whatever suggests itself but one can remain clothed out of habit without making even this evaluative judgement.

Sarah is unlikely to think that her choice does not really matter. Nevertheless, she also fails to deliberate about what she should do. Sarah may feel *obliged* to tell the truth but it is at this stage an open question whether her sense of obligation highlights some desirable feature of the thing she feels obliged to do. By telling the truth, she'll cause pain to the author, do nothing to improve his work, damage her own career, embarrass other members of the conversational group, etc. In this respect, there is nothing special about the obligation to be truthful. As Hume observed, fulfilling one's promises, respecting people's property rights, obeying the commands of a legitimate authority may all involve doing things that have nothing to recommend them (Hume 1978, Book 3, Part 2). Postponing further discussion of obligation until the last section, I'll focus on Chris for a while.

It is possible to make sense of what Chris does without invoking any appearance of the good. When Chris first went swimming as a child, his parents provided him with a pair of trunks and instructed him to wear them. There are many sound reasons for obeying such an instruction and Chris took these reasons into account when deciding what to do on that first occasion. But once he had worn trunks for a bit, it is pretty unlikely that Chris thought any further on the matter until he found himself on a nudist beach. The sight of the nudist beach compels him to choose whether to wear his trunks on this occasion. How does Chris make this choice?

A rationalist would expect Chris to make his choice by deliberating, by comparing the pros and cons of sticking to his habit or of following the crowd. For such a rationalist, the choice required of Chris involves his forming a judgement about what it would be best for him to do, what he has most reason to do or at least what reason permits him to do. In fact, Chris makes his choice without considering the merits of the case. Though he does consider the matter, Chris decides what to do without forming any judgement about what he ought to do. 'I always wear clothes in public' is all that he thinks.

Habitual choice is not the only instance of choice without an ought-judgement. Confronted by a row of Mars Bars, I decide to take the one on the right hand side. Here, I plump for a particular Mars Bar without judging that I ought to take that particular bar. I may well judge that I ought to take a random Mars Bar but there is no way of reasoning from that judgement to the choice of this particular bar. Yet, I take this particular bar quite deliberately, i.e. because I choose to take. Here, I may judge that my choice is at least permissible (i.e. is not such that I ought not to choose it) but Chris and Sarah do not even make that judgement.

How might Chris's habit of φ -ing enter into his thinking about whether to φ ? No one would suppose that the *mere* fact that one is in the habit of φ -ing counts in favour of φ -ing but might Chris judge that he has reason to do what he is in the habit of doing because he would feel uncomfortable doing anything else, because following habit saves time and other scarce cognitive resources? This suggestion likely misrepresents Chris's train of thought. In so far as one thinks in this way and acts for these reasons, one is not acting *out of habit*. One who acts out of habit does not consider the pros and cons of acting out of habit, their habit of φ -ing is not treated by them as a consideration in favour of φ -ing which feeds into deliberation about whether to φ . Rather a habit bypasses or blocks such deliberation. To φ out of habit in a particular instance may or may not involve choosing to φ ; either way, it involves no judgment that it would be good in this instance to φ out of habit.¹²

Until now I have been considering one form of rationalism according to which intentional action is action motivated by awareness of a reason. To see what other forms may

be available, we must distinguish *complying* with reason from *conforming* to reason (Raz 1999, 178). One who complies with a reason is motivated by their awareness of the reason with which they comply but one can conform to a reason, in the sense of doing what it recommends, without complying with it and one's conformity can be non-accidental without being a case of compliance, without being a case of acting on the reason to which one conforms. (For example, one may habitually follow the advice of a wise parent and so conform to the reasons on which their advice is based without having any idea of what they are.) Armed with this distinction, the rationalist may allow that acting out of habit is an intelligible case of intentional activity provided it involves non-accidental conformity with reason. Call this *Objective Rationalism*.

To see the point, return to Chris. There is little or nothing to be said in favour of Chris's keeping his trunks on but suppose that by habitually remaining clothed in public Chris saves on the costs of deliberation about whether to disrobe and is able to resist the temptation to disrobe in (other) situations where disrobing is a bad thing (James 1950, 121). Even if this beach is not a place in which Chris ought to remain clothed, by breaking the habit on this occasion he will weaken it (we may suppose) rendering it less likely that he will act out of habit on those occasions when it would be good so to do. Of course Chris could not *comply* with such reasons to act out of habit (i.e. act because he thought those considerations counted in favour of his so acting) without ceasing to act out of habit and the deliberation-saving or temptation-avoiding value of the habit would be lost if the maintenance of the habit became just one more factor in his deliberations. Nevertheless, by remaining clothed out of habit, Chris may *conform* to such reasons and thus vindicate his performance in the eyes of the Objective Rationalist. Perhaps, acting on habit can be rationally intelligible provided there is some reason to act out of habit even if acting out of habit excludes acting *on* this reason.

This proposal raises two queries. First, it can't *suffice* for a piece of behaviour to constitute intelligible agency that the agent thereby non-accidentally conforms with a reason. Suppose our man's craving for sawdust is the product of some vitamin deficiency, a deficiency that the sawdust will somehow alleviate. That fact won't in itself render his action intelligible. An action may manifest a disposition to behave in beneficial ways without thereby making sense *qua* intentional action. Nor can it be *necessary* for a piece of behaviour to constitute intelligible agency that either it or the disposition it manifests reliably serves some good. What one might call *Subjective Rationalism* picks up on the fact that at least one way to render an action intelligible is to note that it appears to its agent to have something to be said for it and this appearance often renders the action intelligible even when it is illusory, even when there is in fact nothing to be said for it. If our man believes (perhaps wishfully) that eating sawdust will do him the world of good, this is usually enough to make sense of what he does. It is unclear how the Objective Rationalist can accommodate this fact given that no reason is conformed to in such a case.

We have yet to see how the objective and subjective aspects of practical intelligibility can fit together in a way consistent with the rationalist idea that practical intelligibility is, at bottom, a matter of pursuing the good. Now rationalists have faced up to this issue in the course of explaining the formation of intentions and policies. Often people do things which they see no point in doing simply because they are disposed to stick to their decisions. Such actions seem perfectly intelligible and their intelligibility depends on the fact that being resolute is a beneficial disposition. But it also depends on the fact that the agent retains some sensitivity to the reasons that led them to take those decisions in the first place. As

we shall see, that prevents the rationalist from applying their account of action on policy to action on habit.

3. Habits and policies

The Will, no less than the Intellect, requires a memory. We can't always be starting from scratch in the practical any more than in the theoretical realm. It must be possible to settle in advance what is to happen, to motivate future action. Thus, it must be possible to store our choices so their influence persists beyond the moment at which they are made. And for this, it is not enough that we remember that we have chosen; the choice itself must persist in some form.¹³ That can happen in at least two ways.

First, the choice might lead to the formation of a future-directed intention, a decision to act at some future point or to adopt a general policy of so acting. Here, the choice persists in that the intention persists; we remain decided on a course of action until the moment of execution arrives, at which point the decision makes sense of its execution. Second, the choice might be part of a pattern of similar choices that together constitute a habit of choice. None of these choices need be future directed because repeated choice can make sense of future choices without being directed towards the future, without constituting a decision about the future or the adoption of a general policy.

In this section, I'll compare habits with policies. A policy is an intention to perform or refrain from a certain type of action in certain circumstances, e.g. to run every lunchtime or eat only twice a day. In recent years, philosophers working within a rationalist framework have formulated detailed and plausible accounts of how intentions, resolutions and policies both motivate and rationalize human behaviour. These accounts are inspired by the idea that the function of policy is to preserve the motivational and justificational force of the reasons that led one to adopt the policy in the first place. I shall argue that habits make sense of action in a rather different way.

The similarities between habits and policies are undeniable. For one thing, habits have generality: I may be in the habit of going for a daily walk. For another, both habits (at least those that interest me) and policies stem from choice. I adopt the policy of going for a run every lunchtime by choosing to go for a run every lunchtime and I get into the habit of going for a daily walk by choosing to go for a walk on a certain number of days. Finally, we may suppose that these originating choices are all rationally intelligible, are all based on some desirable feature of the chosen thing. Still both the thing chosen and the way reasons support the choice differ markedly in the case of habit.

A policy of running every lunchtime is adopted when I choose to engage in that pattern of behaviour for reasons that make the whole pattern look good. I might adopt this policy because of the health benefits of regular exercise, or because I generally need a break in the middle of the day. By contrast, there need be no constant factor behind the various choices that established my daily walk. I choose to walk on Monday morning because the sun is shining and I need some exercise, on Tuesday morning to distract me from work and because I need some exercise, on Wednesday morning to get away from a family row and because the sun is shining, etc. And by Friday, I am in the habit of taking a daily walk.

Recent writing on the psychological function of policies (and of future-directed intentions) has focused on two points, both of which are analogs of points I made earlier in connection with habit.¹⁴ First, by adopting a policy of running, I can avoid the costs of deliberating each morning about whether to run, of weighing up the pros and cons of running in order to arrive at a judgment about whether to run on that particular day. These costs include the time and energy consumed by any deliberation but they also

include the costs of any errors I'm likely to commit when forced to deliberate in unfavourable circumstances. If I can decide in advance, then I can deliberate when I'm calmer, more focused, less tired than perhaps I would be at the time of action. Second, my policy of running may ward off the temptation not to run. When I resolve to do something, I frequently anticipate that I'll be less inclined to do it when the time comes. Lunch looks more inviting as midday approaches.¹⁵ Knowing this, I've resolved to run rather than eat and such resolutions frequently enable people to resist the temptations they are directed against.

Bratman and Holton suggest that a policy performs these functions principally by preventing reconsideration of the decision to implement the policy (Bratman 1987, chap. 5; Holton 2009, 121–125). Were I to reconsider my decision to run each morning, I would incur the costs of deliberation and if I reconsider this decision anytime near lunch, my appetite for food will be significantly greater than my appetite for exercise, though the reverse may be true earlier on. And here's the thing: *were* I to consider whether to run today, it might be sensible for me decide not to run (it's now raining, I've already incurred the costs of deliberation and since I've been running so religiously, whether I go today will make little difference to anything). Nevertheless, it remains rational for me not to reconsider. On the present view, running today may be rational because non-reconsideration of my decision to run is rational even though, were I to reconsider, I would rationally decide not to run.

Bratman (1987, 66) speaks of (rational) habits of non-reconsideration and Holton (2009, 141) of tendencies not to reconsider. Neither thinks that the mere fact that I have resolved to run every lunchtime makes my running this lunchtime at all desirable. Should I get myself to run on a rainy day by rehearsing my policy, I am not getting myself to run under the guise of the good. The rain prompts me to consider what to do but I can decide to stick to my policy simply by reminding myself of my policy and without considering whether I *ought* to stick to it, without considering its merits (Holton 2009, 123). Still running as a matter of policy (unlike say running because of an hypnotic suggestion) is a paradigm case of intentional activity, activity that is under my control (Pink 1996, 93–99; Holton 2009, 147). Furthermore I here *choose* to act on policy, another instance of choice without normative judgement. Of course I *could* make such a judgement and act on the basis of it, contemplating the very considerations outlined above, considerations which count in favour of sticking to one's resolutions, the costs involved and so forth but such a procedure is self-defeating since it incurs the costs of deliberation and makes one vulnerable to temptation by reopening the issue of what one ought to do. The special benefits of resolute action are won only if one is not motivated by the prospect of those benefits. Here, we have a form of Objective Rationalism.

It would be foolish to suppose that one should never revise one's policies, or ask oneself whether they should be applied in this instance (Holton 2009, 75). When a tropical storm is in progress, one must reconsider whether to run but (living in a rainy climate as you do) a summer shower shouldn't lead you to contemplate abandoning your daily run even though the prospect of getting wet is a genuine inconvenience. This is not the kind of reason you should even consider acting on, though regret at the rain and hope that it will stop are perfectly in order. Your policy has an exclusion zone around it, one that rules out consideration of discomfort but not of threats to your health. Policies exclude a certain range of reasons from our deliberations and should block deliberation altogether in those many instances in which the only reasons recommending breach of policy fall within the excluded range.¹⁶

I'll say that policy implementation involves habits of exclusion. Often this exclusion (though intentional) will not involve any choice, will not require me to think about it but

sometimes I do *choose* to exclude the rain from my deliberations and choose to do so from habit.¹⁷ True, if I need to *deliberate* about whether to exclude the rain from my considerations, I'll lose much of the benefit of so doing but that shows only that my choice of exclusion need not be a product of deliberation about whether to exclude. Though choosing involves thinking, one can think about what to do without incurring the costs of deliberation that it is the function of policy to avoid. For example, I might ensure that I stick with my policy and choose to run precisely by *reminding myself that I have decided to run*.

The model of policy rationality just sketched covers the two aspects of rational intelligibility I identified in the last section. The subjective aspect is present in the idea that the original choice of policy must be intelligible in virtue of the policy's apparent benefits, benefits that need not be real for the adoption of the policy to be intelligible. The objective aspect is present in the idea that one can intelligibly stick to a policy without being guided either by an awareness of the reasons which led one to adopt the policy (or by any other reasons) provided that by sticking to one's policy one conforms with certain reasons. Those reasons are the very ones I outlined when describing the psychological function of policies. They determine what constitute good 'habits of non-reconsideration'.

More constraints are needed to arrive at an adequate model of policy implementation. A rational agent *would not implement a policy if they judged that the reasons for which they adopted the policy no longer applied*.¹⁸ One need not recall these reasons to intelligibly implement the policy and indeed part of the point of settling on a policy is so you no longer need clutter your memory with the reasons that led you to adopt it. But where it is (in one way or another) evident to you that these reasons no longer apply, one must reconsider the policy.¹⁹ Should one refuse to reconsider it, carrying on simply as a matter of policy is no longer even intelligible: the policy is now operating more like an hypnotic suggestion. I happen to recall that my policy of going for a run every morning is based on the notion that this will add 5 years to my lifespan and then I learn that running is more likely to cause a seizure. I have now lost my original reason to run and thereby acquired a decisive reason to reopen the issue of whether I should run. My running resolution no longer makes sense of my running. Where I don't realize that the original reasons for the policy no longer apply, it may still be rational to implement it without deliberation; to that extent, policies are a source of rational intelligibility. But where I know that the original reasons have gone, sticking with the policy makes no sense.

The need for this constraint suggests a further point: in characterizing the way policies make sense of action, it isn't enough to allude merely to the instrumental benefits of being disposed to adhere to one's policies (saving on the costs of deliberation and so forth). For example, were you able to adopt the intention of drinking a mild toxin when someone offers you a large reward for adopting such an intention, you would acquire a disposition that is highly beneficial, namely the disposition to drink the toxin when the time comes (Kavka 1983). But since the reward is for forming the intention and not for executing it, the benefits of that disposition will make little sense of your manifesting it by drinking the toxin precisely because you judge that there is no good in actually drinking. In general, it makes no sense to φ just because you have a policy of φ -ing, where you also judge that there is nothing to be said for φ -ing.²⁰

Can we tell a similar story about the intelligibility of habitual action? As already noted, there need be no reason or set of reasons for which I adopted the habit of a daily walk: I might well have acquired the habit of walking each morning by walking for a different reason on each of a sufficiently long series of mornings. Perhaps, these reasons are not even consistent: I went for a walk on Day One to please my parents, on Day Two to defy them.²¹ So the ability of this habit to make sense of the fact that I am walking

today is not contingent on whether the reasons leading me to walk on Day One or on Day Two still apply. Once I am in the habit of walking, I may happen to know that none of those reasons apply today. Nevertheless, if it ever made sense for me to walk purely as a matter of habit then it may well make sense for me to walk today also and that opens up the possibility that it might make sense for me to walk today even if I judge that there is nothing at all to be said in favour of walking. If habit alone can make sense of action, then habit is a *source* of practical intelligibility, it creates lines of intelligible activity in a way that policy never could. The repetition of choice can render further choice intelligible on a basis quite different to that on which the initial choice was made.²²

4. Habits and virtues

For the rationalist, facts about goodness or value make sense of choice by making the chosen act desirable in some respect. I shall argue that facts about goodness or value can make sense of choice in another way. Sarah and Chris think ‘I’m no liar’ and ‘I don’t go naked in public’. These thoughts concern character traits and represent the act in question as a manifestation of those traits. On a given occasion, Sarah and Chris may choose to act as they do without entertaining any such thoughts but their aptness indicates something important: we should look for the values that make sense of these actions in the value of the traits they manifest rather than in the value of their manifestations.

Let’s call any character trait that is valuable for its own sake a *virtue*. There is no restriction to traits conceived of as having ‘moral’ value. Sarah might think she is under an obligation to speak truthfully and so be blameworthy if she lies: her habit may present her with a moral demand. Alternatively, Sarah might regard truthfulness as a personal ideal, feeling only shame or regret when she falls short. Either way, truthfulness is in her eyes a virtue, a character trait valuable for its own sake.

It may be that some virtues are not habits: perhaps certain people are innately kind or generous. Kindness or generosity pose no problems for the rationalist since the desirability of helping someone across a road can make sense of so doing regardless of any previous pattern of choice. I am interested in those virtues that must take the form of habits because they can motivate action regardless of the desirability of the act in question.²³ Such, I would argue, are Hume’s ‘artificial’ virtues: respect for property, the keeping of promises, obedience to a legitimate authority and so forth (Hume 1978, Book 3, Part 2).²⁴ Sarah’s truthfulness is in this sense an artificial virtue, which is why she can tell the truth even when there is nothing to be said for it.

People choose to tell the truth for all sorts of reasons: because it is extremely useful to be regarded as a trustworthy informant, because they are worried about inflicting harm on others by misleading them, because they get more pleasure out of describing than inventing, because they want to state their view and get it off their chest, because they can’t be bothered to dissimulate. Suppose Sarah acquires the habit of truthfulness by being truthful for different reasons on different occasions. Then she finds herself in a situation in which none of these reasons apply. Can she intelligibly tell the truth even on this occasion?

The rationalist may suppose that if Sarah chooses to tell the truth, she must have adopted a policy of truthfulness for some of the reasons just cited and that her truthfulness on this occasion is a form of resolute behaviour. But intelligible policy implementation requires the absence of a certain judgment, namely the judgement that the reasons for which one settled on the policy no longer apply and where it is clear to Sarah that there is nothing to be said for being truthful on this occasion, it must be equally clear that her original reasons, whatever they were, have lost their traction. There is no similar limitation

on the intelligible manifestation of a habit. The reasons for which Sarah acquired the habit of truthfulness need not constitute a case for being truthful applicable whenever that habit is manifested. What enables the intelligible manifestation of a habit is the absence of a rather different judgement, namely the judgement that truthfulness has no value.

For habitual agency to be intentional, it must be under the control of a value judgement of some sort. I propose that there are at least two ways in which an action can be intentional. First, in virtue of being sensitive to your views about whether there is anything desirable about performing the action. Second, in virtue of being sensitive to your views about whether there is anything intrinsically desirable about the habit that the action manifests. We should not require a virtuous agent to judge the habit they manifest to be a virtue, either now or at any point in the past; virtue need not involve the thought of itself. Indeed, if Sarah speaks truthfully today only because she has today considered whether truthfulness is a good habit, Sarah is not now being truthful from habit.²⁵ What being (intentionally) truthful from habit requires is only the absence of a negative appraisal. And if truthfulness can be valuable for its own sake, then one can judge that there is nothing desirable about being truthful (on this occasion) without also judging that truthfulness is no virtue, without judging that truthfulness (on this occasion) would not manifest an intrinsically desirable habit. Therefore, Sarah can intentionally tell the author the truth about the book from habit.

One of the attractions of rationalism was its ability to explain why it matters to us whether we act intentionally. This advantage is inherited by my proposal. It often matters to us whether we could control what we are doing by taking a view of the merits of the habits we manifest in so acting. Nevertheless, such control isn't sufficient to ensure that one's behaviour is intentional (and so a candidate for virtue). Perhaps, I can stop biting my nails should I become convinced that the sight of my biting my nails disgusts you but it does not follow that I am biting my nails intentionally, for I never intentionally bit my nails.²⁶ Motivation by an artificial virtue requires more than the absence of the judgement that one's habit is no virtue: the virtue must have been inculcated through repeated choice.

My proposal raises two questions. First, can a habit be good except in virtue of the desirability of the actions to which it gives rise? Second, granted that a habit can be good for its own sake, how can your attitude to the value of the habit make sense of an action that manifests the habit when the value of the habit is no guide to the value of the action decided upon? As to the second question, the rationalist must answer that a habit's being valuable for its own sake isn't directly relevant to the intelligibility of the actions that manifest that habit. No rational agent could get themselves to φ simply by reflecting that the habit of φ -ing is a good thing. To make that argument, they'd need the further idea that there is something desirable about manifesting the habit of φ -ing on this occasion.²⁷

Suppose I am deliberating about whether to tell the truth, that is I am trying to decide whether to tell the truth by arriving at a judgement about whether I ought to tell the truth. How does it help me to know that my habit of truthfulness is good for its own sake? That would help me if the question were whether to reinforce that habit or else to do something that might weaken it. For example, suppose I thought that being untruthful on this occasion would weaken my valuable habit of truthfulness, then the value of this habit should register in my deliberations about whether to manifest it on this occasion. But if this isn't so, how can reflection on the desirability of the habit move me to manifest it? No such course of practical reasoning could get me to φ .

This is a problem only so long as we assume that intentional habitual agency must be agency we could have arrived at by practical deliberation. But why assume that? As already

noted, to act out of habit is not to invoke one's habit as a consideration in one's deliberation about what to do (or indeed in one's deliberations about whether to deliberate). It is to allow one's habit of φ -ing to pre-empt such deliberations. And this is something one does intentionally provided one wouldn't allow one's habit to pre-empt deliberation if one judged that one's habit of φ -ing were no virtue.²⁸ After the fact, Sarah might reflect on her tendency to tell the truth (without deliberation) even where this will do no good but so long as she believes truthfulness itself to be valuable such reflection need not disturb her.

Here, it is crucial that Sarah regards the habit she manifests as being valuable *for its own sake*. It wouldn't help her to know that being in the habit of speaking truthfully has many good effects. Suppose the value of the habit of φ -ing is purely instrumental: it derives from the value of its effects, behavioural and otherwise.²⁹ It is hard to see how a belief in that sort of value could render intelligible the manifestation of the habit in a case in which it is known that this manifestation will have no such desirable effects. But if the value of the habit resides in the habit rather than in the value of its manifestation, Sarah's approval of her habit provides reflective reassurance.

When confronted with the author, Sarah *chooses* to be truthful. Since she does so out of habit, she does not deliberate. So what goes through her mind here? On many occasions, the answer is nothing – she is intentionally truthful without choosing to be truthful – but on this occasion she is likely to feel the need for more. Sarah might feel obliged to be truthful. On the other hand, she might feel that were she untruthful, she'd be letting herself down, be vulnerable to her own and other people's contempt rather than their indignation. Calling an obligation or a personal ideal to mind can be a good way of getting yourself to do something it is hard to do (just like rehearsing a policy), but this need not involve treating the obligation, the ideal or the policy as a consideration that counts in favour of truthfulness.³⁰ Rather in cases of habitual agency (obligation included), a block on deliberation comes to your attention, often with the result that the block is reinforced.

Let's turn now to our first question: how can a habit be valuable for its own sake? No one will deny that a habit can be desirable because it is a cause of actions (or omissions) desirable for their own sake; yet, many habits are thought to possess a value of a different kind, a value not derived from the value of the actions they motivate. That's how people like Sarah think about truthfulness and that's why it makes sense for Sarah to be truthful even when she sees nothing desirable in being truthful. Chris may feel that in keeping his clothes on he is subscribing to a worthwhile custom of public dress, a custom flouted by the behaviour of those on the beach. Chris need not imagine that the existence of this valuable custom is affected one way or the other by whether he adheres to it on this occasion. Nevertheless, Chris thinks, his habit of remaining clothed in public is a virtue, is valuable for its own sake (though perhaps only because many others share this habit). In Chris's eyes, wearing clothes makes sense because *we* don't go naked in public. One need endorse neither Chris's nor Sarah's way of thinking to agree that it renders their behaviour intelligible.

I've said that habits are like resolutions in that they shape our deliberation by excluding a range of otherwise relevant considerations. The same is true of habits that constitute virtues.³¹ To be truthful is not just to speak the truth more or less reliably; it also involves thinking in a certain way about whether to speak the truth. For example, a truthful person will not seriously consider telling a lie because it would improve their prospects of promotion.³² And to exclude isn't to judge (say) that the claims of ambition are too weak to be worth considering once they are up against the demands of truthfulness. One who makes such judgments might still feel tempted to lie in order to further their career, might feel inclined to act on reasons of ambition. Of course exclusion has limits. Sometimes the consequences of being frank may be so grave that a truthful person *will* deliberate about

whether to speak frankly in light of them – lying to Kant’s murderer and so forth – but much that would otherwise be relevant must be excluded.

Some rationalists argue that, for the virtuous person, certain otherwise relevant considerations will count for nothing, will be deprived of all force in the face of a ‘moral’ demand. To borrow an example from Scanlon, even a minimally decent person will not consider whether to hide their elderly relative’s medicine in order to hasten an inheritance (Scanlon 1998, 156–157). That claim is perfectly consistent with rationalism provided we suppose that hastening the inheritance *is* no reason to precipitate our relative’s death (though it remains a perfectly good reason for badgering the probate office once the relative has died a natural death). And that is precisely Scanlon’s view: not only do we lack any reason to precipitate our relative’s death, we lack any reason to even hope that he dies prematurely or to enjoy it when he does and so forth. As a reason for hastening my relative’s death, my need for money lacks all normative force. Can this line of thought enable the rationalist to accommodate the exclusionary character of virtue? I express no view on Scanlon’s example but his point will not generalize to artificial virtues like truthfulness.

The habits of exclusion characteristic of the truthful person are specifically deliberative: they exclude certain otherwise perfectly genuine reasons from the context of practical deliberation alone. In the emotional sphere, these reasons are unimpeded by virtue. Sarah would be no less truthful were she to *regret* the fact that she can’t advance her career by telling her boss what he wants to hear. Here, she may think, she is sacrificing a genuine good for the sake of telling the truth and regret is perfectly in order, provided she feels no temptation to lie for this reason.³³ And Chris would be a no less conventional dresser for wishing that he could sun bathe naked on a deserted beach. For both parties, the excluded reason retains its normative force. In this respect, the habits of exclusion involved in artificial virtues are similar to those involved in being resolute: the rain makes the fact that one must run this morning regrettable. What the resolute person does not do is to reopen the issue of whether they ought to run that morning in the light of the fact that it is raining.

I conclude that habit can make sense of both action and deliberative exclusion even in cases where you judge that there is nothing desirable about manifesting the habit. This is because the habit might be a virtue, valuable for its own sake. The value of such a virtue is not just a reflection of the value of its effects and so its ability to make sense of both action and deliberative exclusion is not confined to cases where these constitute valuable effects. Provided honesty is the sort of thing that might be valuable for its own sake and I don’t believe otherwise, my honesty can make sense of my speaking truthfully. And it can make sense of my speaking truthfully even though there is no way of reasoning from the value of the habit to the value of the act.

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Notes

1. This notion of ‘making sense’ is close to Weber’s *Verstehen*. ‘A correct causal interpretation of typical action means that the process which is claimed to be typical is shown to be both adequately grasped on the level of meaning and at the same time the interpretation is to some degree causally adequate’. As he notes, no degree of regularity in a pattern of behaviour will render it intelligible if ‘adequacy with respect to meaning is lacking’ (Weber 1947, 99). Weber regards both ‘affection’ and ‘tradition’ as non-rational sources of intelligible social action (115).
2. This formulation is not meant as an analysis of any of the notions contained in it. It merely provides some information about the relationship between them.
3. I want to leave it open to what extent and in what ways the agent might be wrong in thinking that they have a certain reason. The rationalist’s point is that the agent must think that they have a reason.
4. Other rationalists (e.g. intuitionists, coherentists) have rather different conceptions of a practical reason but, to limit discussion, I set them to one side. Most writers on agency have endorsed the value-based form of rationalism. Among the moderns, Hume (1978, 439) and Kant (1996, 186) both endorse it. Among contemporaries, the list includes Anscombe and Davidson.
5. Velleman (1989, 202–204) describes any consideration that would render an action intelligible as a reason for that action, so he says that habits do constitute reasons. But he acknowledges that one need see nothing desirable in doing what one is in the habit of doing so, for present purposes, he is no rationalist.
6. There is the idea of ‘acting deliberately’ which seems to apply to any chosen action but I give ‘deliberation’ a narrow construal, one which emphasizes the connection between deliberation and practical reasoning. The point of substance here is the claim that one can have choice and practical thinking without practical reasoning and, if so, one needs to decide how to use the word ‘deliberation’.
7. For rationalism’s most implacable opponents, habit, custom and practice frame every decision we make; there is no such thing as choice purely on the merits (Oakeshott 1991; Hayek 1960, chap. 2). Perhaps, they are wrong; even so purely rational choice may be as infrequent as purely habitual choice. There is a precedent for most of what we do and the force of precedent is often embodied in habits.
8. In recent discussion of the ‘guise of the good’, rationalism has been subject to various counterexamples. Some of these are cases where there is no good in doing what you are doing but no particular objection to it either (doodling). In others you act in the teeth of various objections and for no obvious reason but you are (or at least ought to be) dissatisfied with your behaviour. Chris and Sarah ignore various objections to what they are doing but (I shall argue in the last section) they should nonetheless be comfortable with what they are doing.
9. To vote Republican out of habit, one must have voted for the Republicans at least once before. Beyond this, it is open how much repetition is required for habit formation. In this paper, I shall consider only habits that are formed by choices based on reasons but habits can also be transmitted by imitation (Reid 2010, 84–85; Owens 2012, 157–159).
10. Raz prefers to describe such bodily movements as ‘marginal cases of intentionality, not displaying all the features of intentional actions’ because they are bodily movements we are unaware of performing (Raz 2011, 73). None of this could plausibly be said of the habitual actions described above.
11. For example, ‘an action done from pure habit is one that is not done on purpose’ (Ryle 1949, 132). See also Reid (2010, 88–91), James (1950, 122) and (Bergson 1991, 81). Mill furnishes a precedent for my own usage: ‘Many indifferent things, which men originally did from a motive of some sort, they continue to do from habit. Sometimes this is done unconsciously, the consciousness coming only after the action: at other times with conscious volition, but volition which has become habitual’ (Mill 1961, 225). Another precedent may be the Aristotelian idea that virtue is a habit of choice. Velleman suggests ‘custom’ as a term for the non-automatic habits that concern me (Velleman 1989, 70–72, 204).

12. The fact that one is in the habit of φ -ing does not imply that one always φ s out of habit, i.e. without deliberating about the merits of φ -ing. Nor does it imply that it would always be intelligible to φ out of habit. Were the death penalty imposed on those who wore clothes on a nudist beach, doing so from habit would seem compulsive. I claim only that Chris can intelligibly choose to remain clothed without seeing anything desirable in so doing.
13. As Soteriou (2013, 291) notes, remembering to do something that you earlier decided to do involves more than merely remembering that you decided to do it.
14. Bratman (1987, 2–3) emphasizes the first point, Holton (2009, 9–12) and Raz (1999, 71–72) the second. Bratman and Holton see social co-ordination as a further function of policy but I have my doubts about this.
15. Lunch's 'looking more inviting' may involve my overestimating its value or else my failing to be motivated by an accurate estimate of its value (or both).
16. In some cases, policy is only part of the explanation of why we act as we do. Perhaps, the stifling atmosphere in the house helps to get me out of it; my running policy alone is not enough. But my running policy is still crucial because it blocks deliberation about whether to run given that it is raining. In this mixed case, I run because I think that I ought to run in order to get myself out of the house, a judgement which is not the result of an open-minded consideration of the pros and cons. Rather, it is the product of a policy that constrains without completely blocking my practical deliberations.
17. Holton maintains that habit excludes choice (Holton 2009, 69).
18. True, one might be able think of new reasons for the policy (e.g. the fact that everyone now expects you to carry out the policy and will suffer if you don't.) I would say that readopting the policy on those grounds would involve a new decision, a decision to adopt a different policy with the same content, rather than persistence of the old policy. Alternatively, one might add the clause 'unless they knew of other reasons for maintaining the policy' to the italicized phrase.
19. (Bratman 1987, 65) and (Holton 2009, 160) both endorse this principle though Raz appears to reject it (Raz 1999, 197).
20. Holton (2009, 162–165) maintains that it is rational not to reconsider your resolution to drink the toxin even once you have got the money at least in imaginary cases where having a habit of not reconsidering such resolutions would produce good effects. In the next section, I argue that attributing instrumental value to a habit is not enough to make sense of manifesting the habit where it is clear that there is nothing to be said for acting on habit.
21. In the case of policy, one might suppose that the psychological function of blocking deliberation as to whether to run this morning could be served by a belief that one ought to run every morning, a belief that one brings to mind in order to get oneself to run. This proposal may be resisted on the grounds that mere beliefs lack the motivational efficacy of intentions. And, in any case, the idea can't be applied to habits since no such belief need have been formed.
22. The line between policy and habit is frequently blurred by the fact that if I've implemented my policy of running on a sufficient number of occasions, I've probably acquired the habit of running and so, if I carry on running, that action may now be intelligible as a matter of habit. But this will not be so where having had little chance to implement my policy, I have acquired no habit that might make sense of my run. And the underlying contrast remains even where both policy and habit are getting me to run.
23. Can Sarah be intentionally truthful though she herself has neither acquired the habit of truthfulness nor sees any reason to be truthful on this occasion? I think she can, namely by choosing to imitate the truthful behaviour of those around her (Owens 2012, 157–159). More generally the habits of others can make sense of what we do but this is a theme for another occasion.
24. Here are two models of virtue. On the *resolution* model, one acquires the virtue of truthfulness by adopting a policy of telling the truth, a policy adopted for the right reasons, whatever they might be (Kant 1996, 258). On the habit model, one can acquire the virtue of truthfulness by telling the truth for all sorts of reasons, e.g. love of praise or fear of punishment (Aquinas 2010, Part I-II, Question 92, Article 2). Still once one has the habit/virtue and acts out of that virtue, then one tells the truth 'for its own sake', provided one is sensitive to whether truthfulness is a virtue.
25. Similarly, if I ran this morning only once, I had reconsidered whether my running resolution was a good thing, today's run was not a manifestation of resolve.

26. In this respect, policy lies between habit and disposition. Like a disposition to run and unlike a running habit, you can have a policy of running without ever having implemented that policy. But whereas a brute disposition to run can be possessed by someone who has never chosen to run or imitated running, such a person has neither a habit nor a policy of running.
27. In this connection, see Thompson's discussion of 'transfer principles' (Thompson 2008, chap. 10).
28. Though one regards smoking as a 'bad habit', one can still smoke intentionally provided one thinks there is something to be said for smoking.
29. I say 'otherwise' because having a certain motivational psychology might, for instance, enhance our capacity to take pleasure in things (Adams 1976, 470–472).
30. For more on obligation as a block on deliberation, see Owens (2012, chap. 3).
31. Raz (1999, 198–199) floats the idea that deliberative exclusion may have non-instrumental value. Perhaps, this can be true of the habits of exclusion involved in both policy implementation and habitual agency. Still a difference remains: if you do somehow realize that there is no reason to implement your policy, then it makes no sense to implement it.
32. And Chris isn't a conventional dresser if he seriously contemplates indulging in the pleasure of exhibitionism.
33. This shows that we can't explain the phenomenon of exclusion by saying that the 'excluded' reason is 'not worth worrying about'.

Notes on contributor

David Owens is the author of three monographs: *Shaping the Normative Landscape* (Oxford 2012), *Reason Without Freedom* (Routledge 2000) and *Causes and Coincidences* (Cambridge 1992). A volume of his papers *Normativity and Control* (Oxford 2017) is forthcoming.

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