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Habitual Actions and Intentionality

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Abstract

This dissertation is an investigation of the intentionality of habitual actions. In the recent years, habitual actions became object of important debates in the philosophy of action, as it has been proposed that they might challenge a widely accepted theory of action: The Causal Theory of Action. According to this theory, what distinguishes actions from mere happenings is that actions are appropriately caused by the agent's psychological states – beliefs, desires, or intentions. Such mental states do not seem to play a significant role in the performance of habitual actions, which are typically executed without the agent having in mind what he or she is doing, and even with the mind busy with other more complex tasks, such as organizing the day, planning the week, remembering an old conversation or wondering what to do on New Year's Eve. Yet, as we will see, there are good reasons to think that habitual actions are indeed actions, as opposed to mere behaviors. The purpose of this dissertation is to address the issue of whether habitual actions are intentional actions. In doing this, I will also discuss what makes an action intentional, what grants habitual actions the status of actions, and what the intentionality of habitual actions, or lack thereof, implies for the Causal Theory of Action as a general theory of action.

The dissertation comprises four chapters. In the first chapter, I will provide a characterization of habits and habitual actions which

distinguishes them, respectively, from similar kinds of dispositions and behaviors. I will argue that habits are acquired dispositions to perform certain actions in certain situations to which they become associated through repetition which are not associated with the strong desires or urges. And, as I will argue, habitual actions are actions explained by the agent's habits whose performance involves a reduced need for mental and physical effort, but yet is controllable by the agent and preserves a connection to the agent's goals and intentions that underlay the development of the habits with them associated.

In the second chapter, I will discuss the challenge that habitual actions pose to the Causal Theory of Action. Here I will argue that habitual actions are not caused by the agent's intentions. To do this, I will discuss three arguments, which appeal, in turn, to the phenomenology of habitual actions, to habitual action slips, and to the performance of habitual actions which are in conflict with the agent's motives. I will propose then an alternative explanation for habitual actions which does not appeal to causation by the agent's psychological states, but rather to the agent's habits as dispositions to perform certain actions in the situation to which they become associated through repetition and to the role of the situation in triggering the activation of such dispositions.

In the third chapter I will explore the relationship between habitual and skilled actions. I will discuss the Problem of Subsidiary Actions which skilled activities pose for the Causal Theory of Action, and I will argue

that many of the subsidiary actions involved in the performance of skilled actions are *habitual actions* and as such, in line with what I argued in the second chapter, they do not necessarily require causation by the agent's psychological states. Considerations about the process of habituation and that of skill acquisition will play a fundamental role in my argument.

Finally, in the conclusive chapter of this dissertation, I will address in further depth the issue of the intentionality of habitual actions and of their status as actions, as well as its implications with respect to the validity of the Causal Theory of Action as a general theory of action. I will discuss here two views of habitual actions, which are bound to different implications with respect to the intentionality of such actions. According to one view, habitual actions are intentional actions in virtue of being guided or controlled by the agent; while, according to the other view, habitual actions are non-intentional actions associated with a particular phenomenology *of* agency, which grants them the status of actions. I will show then that the two views are in large part compatible one with the other, and I will try to bring together the advantages of each of them by sketching my own proposal, according to which habitual actions are non-intentional controlled actions. This proposal provides a way of accounting for the agency and reduced intentionality of habitual actions while also leaving space for the Causal Theory as a theory of intentional action.

Publications

Some ideas have appeared previously in the following publication:

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Contents

Chapter 1: Toward a characterization of Habits and Habitual Actions

A centipede was happy – quite!
Until a toad in fun
Said, "Pray, which leg moves after which?"
This raised her doubts to such a pitch,
She fell exhausted in the ditch
Not knowing how to run.
- attributed to Katherine Craster in *Pinafore Poems*, 1871

1. Introduction

Turning off the alarm in the morning, leaving the bus as we reach the stop to our workplace, typing our password as we turn on the laptop and checking our mailbox every evening are just some of the many actions that we typically execute "out of habit," without having to mind what we are doing – habitual actions. Habits guide their execution, releasing us from the burden of constantly thinking to our actions, and it is also because of this that we can go smoothly through our daily routine and having our mind free to organize the day, wonder what to do on the weekend, thinking about the next summer holidays or remembering an awkward conversation we had some months ago.

Even though habits and habitual actions play a fundamental role in our everyday life, only rarely philosophers placed them at the center of their

discussions.[1] Things have changed though in recent times as a number of authors argued that habitual actions could pose a challenge to a widely accepted theory of action: The Causal Theory of Action, the theory that actions differ from other kinds of events and activities because they are caused by the agent's psychological states.

I will enter a detailed discussion of the challenge that habitual actions pose to the Causal Theory in the next chapters, as such issue will be the main focus of this dissertation. But before proceeding it is essential to provide a characterization of habits and habitual actions, which will help to clarify the terminology employed as well as to define the scope of my research.

A preliminary clarification, that is important to make, concerns the way in which I will employ terms 'habit' and 'habitual action' over the dissertation. Although some authors might use those terms interchangeably, I will use the term 'habit' to refer to the disposition to perform habitual actions in the appropriate context, and 'habitual action' to refer to the action itself that is performed out of habit. This considered,

[1] Important exceptions in the history of philosophy can be found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book II), in Dewey's (1922) *Human Nature and Conduct* and in William James's (1890) *Principles of Psychology*. As my purpose in this book is not to dig into the conception of habits and habitual action in the history of philosophy but rather to contribute to the current discussions on the topic, I will only make brief references to some of these approaches so long as it helps for the purpose of providing a better characterization of habits and habitual actions.

for reaching a better understanding of the nature of habitual actions it is important to be clear first on what habits are.

In the following paragraphs I will provide a characterization of habits by emphasizing the distinction between habits and other kinds of disposition that can explain some of the agent's actions or ways of acting and behaving, and with which habits might be confused; namely, character traits, skills, and addictions.[2] I will claim then that habits are acquired dispositions to perform certain actions in certain situations to which they become associated through repetition which – unlike addictions or compulsions – are not associated with strong desires or painful symptoms of abstinence. Finally, I will distinguish habitual actions from other kinds of behaviors with which they share some similarities: reflexes, sub-intentional actions, and skilled actions. In doing this, I will point out those characteristics that habitual actions share with the afore mentioned kinds of actions and behaviors, as well as those characteristics that are unique to habitual actions. I will claim, then, that habitual actions are actions explained by the agent's habits, which become habitual through the repetition of intended actions in specific situations to which they become associated over time. Habituation reduces the effort and attention needed for their execution, however, unlike for the case of reflexes, agents can

[2] Hogson (2010) clarifies the distinction between habits and instincts, while Pollard (2006b) distinguishes habits also from phobias. As I do not consider instincts and phobias the kinds of phenomena typically confused with habits, I will not discuss such distinctions.

normally exercise a certain level of control over the performances of habitual actions. Furthermore, the connection habitual actions preserve a connection to the agent's goals and intentions and to highly specific situations distinguishes them from sub-intentional actions such as nail-biting or playing with one's hair.

2. Habits and other kinds of dispositions

Some of the usages term 'habit' that we make in our ordinary language suggest a broad conception of habits as something that permeates our personality, guiding our reaction in the most diverse situations and playing an essential role in defining who we are. We say, for instance, that our grandfather was "a man of habit," meaning by this that he had the kind of personality that made him reluctant to change. Or we might read in some articles that our friends share on the social media that "assertiveness" and "the ability not to worry in your head" are among the most important mental habits.[3] However, as I see it, assertiveness is more of a personality or character trait than a (mental) habit, just like the possible stubbornness of our grandfather. And while the ability not to worry might be a nice capacity to have, it is also not a habit.

[3] The article, which I just mean to consider here as an example of a broad usage of the term 'habit' and not for its scientific value is titled "8 Powerful Mental Health Habits from a Professional Psychologist" and is available at https://nickwignall.com/mental-health-habits.

Actions such as walking, biking, or driving are often put forward as examples of habits. Yet, in my view, those actions are not executed *out of habits*, and therefore they are not habitual actions, if they are not done regularly in the same kind of situation. Yet, they execution requires the possession of very simple *skills*, a type of dispositions that tends to be confused with habits. By contrast, walking to the bus stop, biking to school, or driving to one's workplace as a part of a person's morning routine are, in my view, typical cases of habitual actions, performed out of habit, as they satisfy the necessary condition of being performed regularly in the associated context.

Finally, frequent gambling, smoking, or compulsively checking the social networks are behaviors guided by additions and compulsions more than by habit, and thus, in my view, they are not to be considered habitual actions or "bad habits", even though we might do so in our non-philosophical conversations.

In what follows, I discuss in turn the distinction between the dispositions explaining each of those kinds of actions or behaviors from *habits*, the dispositions explaining habitual actions.

2.1 Habits and character traits

Some philosophers provide a characterization of habits that is in line with a very broad conception of the term, which captures aspects of our

personality that are not necessarily linked to specific actions or ways of acting. A well-known example is that of John Dewey, who, in his *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), describes habits as "predispositions"[4] to modes of responses which increase sensitiveness to certain class of stimuli, predilections and aversions. One of the examples that he employs in his book (Dewey, 1922 Ch. II) illustrates very well this idea. In his view,

> A man with the habit of giving way to anger may show his habit by a murderous attack upon some one who has offended. His act is nonetheless due to habit because it occurs only once in his life.

Contrary to the intuitions of many, repetition does not play an essential role in his conception of habit, as even an action that is only executed once in someone's lifetime could be the exercise of a one of his or her habits.

While some of the recent philosophical approaches to habits have been likely influenced by Dewey's work, such as those of the neo-pragmatism and 4E-cognition (e.g., Kilpinen, 2012; Ramírez-Vizcaya & Froese,

[4] In Dewey's view, habits are not dispositions but rather *predispositions* because dispositions need an external stimulus to be activated while habits do not.

2019; Cappuccio *et al.*, 2020, Miyahara *et al.*, 2020, Miyahara & Robertson, 2021)[5], in my usage of the term 'habit', I will take distance from that of Dewey, and in particular from the idea that repetition is not essential to habits.

As I see it, what Dewey calls 'habits' might better fall in the realm of what we might call 'character traits': character traits, or personality traits, are what usually plays the function, which Dewey assigns to habits, of guiding our actions and reactions in different situations. "Giving way to anger" is typical of a temperamental or aggressive personality, just as a tendency to smile to strangers can be a sign of a friendly and extrovert personality.

Habits and character traits might have some characteristics in common: they both guide, to an important extent, many of our actions and they both contribute to define, in some sense, who we are. While this is more obvious for character traits, habits indeed also play a substantial role in shaping our identity by making us opt for certain actions rather than others. And it is commonsense knowledge that cultivating good habits, as well as getting rid of bad habits, is a way of improving ourselves.[6]

[5] For an extensive collection on the neo-pragmatist approaches to habits and related topics see Caruana & Tesla (eds.) (2020).

[6] An important discussion of habits and virtue can be found in Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book II, 4).

However, in accordance with how I will employ the term 'habit' here, repetition will be essential to the concept of habit, as habits, in my view, are dispositions acquired through repetition to perform certain actions in the situations to which they become associated. In this, my view on habits is closer to that of Ryle (1949), although, as we will see below, the two views also differ in some relevant aspects.

2.2 Habits and skills

Ryle contrasts habits with intelligent capacities, or *skills*. While both habits and skills are acquired dispositions, or "second natures", in Ryle's view, habits involve a high degree of automaticity which allows the agent to execute them "without having to mind what he is doing" (Ryle, 1940:30), contrary to skills, whose exercise requires care, vigilance, or criticism.

To better illustrate this difference, Ryle refers to the process through which, in his view, habits and skills are acquired. He claims, indeed, that habits such as walking under normal conditions or executing simple multiplications the way we do just by remembering the multiplication tables that we learned when we were children are acquired by drill or mere repetition. By contrast, skills such as solving complex math problems or safely walking over ice-covered rocks in high wind conditions require

training, self-judgment, and constant learning, which allow the agent to constantly improve and do not repeat precedent mistakes.

Furthermore, in Ryle's view, mere repetition not only characterizes the acquisition of habits but also their exercise. He claims that habits are "single-track" dispositions, the exercise of which is nearly uniform over time, while skills are "high-grade" dispositions, the exercise of which is indefinitely heterogeneous, and he means, by this, that an agent's particular skills can manifested in a variety of circumstances in which the agent aptly adapts to the particular context. A skillful actor, for instance, would be able to exercise his or her skills by playing different roles and by performing in front of different audiences, thus by performing a variety of different actions, while the habitual walker would perform the same kind of action in a rather similar way in a variety of situation in which he or she can find himself or herself.

I disagree with Ryle on several points, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter III, but most importantly on the idea that the most substantial difference between habits and skills lies in the degree of automaticity that the exercise of such dispositions entails. Indeed, Ryle's characterization implies that only complex activities which require the agent's "care, vigilance, or criticism" are exercises of skills, but, as I see it, most of the activities that we perform on a daily basis require skills. Among them are actions such as making breakfast, driving to work, or checking our email.

Douskos (2017, 2018) provided a characterization of habits and skills which allows also for the existence of simple, unimpressive skills which we employ in the course of everyday activities. In his view, habits and skills, which are both dispositions involving a certain degree of automaticity, differ primarily on their *explanatory role*: habits explain *why* we execute certain actions in certain situations, while skills explain *how* we do so, the technique we employ to reach the goal of our actions. This way an action can be both habitual and skilled, as we can explain its execution by an agent by making reference to the agent's habits and we can account for the way the agent executes it by referring to his or her skills. To provide an example, Jason's habitual bike ride to work in the morning can be explained by his habit of biking to work on every weekday and is made possible by the biking skills he possesses, which explain how he performs this action.

In line with Doukos, I will take habits to be dispositions that explain why we perform certain actions in certain situations, and skills to be dispositions that explain how we can perform the actions we perform.[7] In addition, while in my view the acquisition of both habits and skills involve to some extent repetition, I take repetition to be essential for the acquisition of habits but not for the acquisition of skills. This because, depending on the kind of skill and likely other characteristics of the agent,

[7] I disagree instead with Douskos with respect to other aspects of his characterization of habits and skills. More on this in Chapter III.

it is in principle possible to acquire at least some very simple skills – such as the skill to turn on the light – even after a single performance, while we cannot claim that an agent has a certain habit if he or she did not perform the action to which that habit is associated a certain number of times. That is, no action can be performed "out of habit" for the first time. Furthermore, as it will come even clearer in the later chapters, I take the role of the situation in which habits are developed to be fundamental. While it is true that the same skill can be exercised in a variety of situations, in acquiring new habits we acquire habits to perform certain actions in certain situations, to which such habits are associated. For instance, we can have a habit of flipping the light switch *when entering a dark room*, typing the passport *as we turn on the laptop*, preparing coffee *in the course of our morning routine*, or of driving to work *on every working day*. Even though certain skills tend to be exercised always in similar situations, and it can also be a skill to be able to quickly determine the right course of action in a given situation, the association between a certain action and a certain situation is not an essential characteristic of skills.

2.3 Habits and addictions

The last phenomena form which I want to distinguish habits are additions and compulsions. Although the distinction between habits and additions might appear obvious at a first glance, these two phenomena are often

confused and there are arguably borderline cases in which it is not fully clear whether a certain action is performed out of habit or addiction.

Typical cases of actions that are often performed because of addictions are drug consumption, binge eating or compulsive usage of social networks. The mechanisms that underlie the performance of such actions differ from habits. Unlike habits, addictions and compulsions seem to be associated with strong desires or urges to satisfy certain needs, and very often also with painful symptoms of psychological or physical abstinence. Being prevented from acting in accordance with one's habits might generate a feeling of discomfort that can vary in degree from a subject to another or depending on the strength of the habit, but such a discomfort is different from the symptoms of physical or psychological abstinence experienced by addicts or by those having obsessive-compulsive disorders.

Borderline cases might include smoking in specific situations. Some smokers have the habit, for instance, of lighting up a cigarette right after drinking coffee. In such a case it is not clear if the cigarette that they smoke right after coffee is performed out of habit or out of an addition. While addiction might bring smokers to smoke a certain number of cigarettes every day, or force them to smoke every few hours, it is unlikely that it is what makes them smoke exactly after drinking coffee. The cigarette after coffee might have become for some smokers a habit out of associating coffee with the act of smoking and repeating the action of

smoking after coffee for a prolonged time. According to this explanation, a smoker, which might also be addicted to nicotine, can light up a cigarette after drinking coffee just out of habit, because he or she is in the situation that triggers the exercise of such a habit. Thus, it is his or her habit here which plays the leading role and not his or her addiction to nicotine, although it is not so for at least most of the other cigarettes that he or she smokes during the day.

The distinction between habits and addictions has been drawn more strongly by Pollard (2006b), who claims that behaviors that are explained by addictions are not actions in the full sense because the dependency from a certain substance or behavior that the addict or the person with a compulsion suffer deprive them of agency and, at least to some extent, of their responsibility over the behaviors that are caused by their addictions or compulsions. In his view (Pollard, 2006b: 60),

> [W]hen we explain somebody's having a drink by referring to their addiction to alcohol, we imply that there is some kind of physiological dependency which is driving the behavior, which is external to her agency. In an important sense, we are saying that she can't help herself.

Agency indeed, as Pollard sees it, derives from the possibility to intervene on one's own behavior, which the addict or the person with a compulsive disorder lose. Notably, the kind of intervention control that Pollard has in mind here, which will be discussed more in detail in Chapter IV, is different from the type of control that one has over the development of addiction. At least in most cases, we have some form of control over the development of addiction, for instance to nicotine or alcohol, we could prevent them by choosing not to start smoking or not to drink in excess. Because of this we can also be held responsible for those addictions that we might eventually develop. However, as Pollard notices and how it has been already mentioned above, resisting to the force of addiction or compulsion requires a strong effort which is not comparable with that of acting against our habits.

We will see in Chapter II that resisting our habits can require some level of effort, and that the agent might have to pay close attention to what he or she is doing so to avoid habitual action slips, i.e., the performance of habitual actions despite by an agent despite his or her intention to act otherwise. But, for now, we can agree with Pollard that a crucial difference between habits and addictions and compulsions is that resisting the latter requires substantial effort and that in some cases the addict simply cannot do so. This is because, as I mentioned before, unlike habits addictions and compulsions are associated with strong desires or urges.

I disagree with Pollard, however, on whether the behaviors caused by compulsions and addictions are actions. Although the question of the drug-addict's assuming a certain substance or the binge eater reaching up the fridge are actions might vary depending on the theory of action adopted, I believe that there are good reasons to think that they are indeed actions.

The endorser of the Causal Theory of Action, according to which behaviors are actions if they are caused by the agent's (appropriate) psychological states – typically, intentions or a combination of desires and beliefs[8] –, could claim, for instance, that the drug-addict's sniffing or his or her drug or injecting it into his arm is performing an action that is caused by the drug addict's desire or urge to satisfy his or her need for the drug and his or her belief that by assuming the drug he or she will satisfy his or her urge or desire. Analogously, it could possibly be argued that the binge-eater reaching the fridge to satisfy her urge to eat has a belief that by reaching the fridge he or she could satisfy his or her urge, and that such belief, together with that urge, cause the reaching of the fridge. Davidson (1973), however, maintain, as Pollard does, that behaviors performed out of addictions or compulsions are not actions as he regards the kind of urges associated with addictions and compulsions as inappropriate states to cause intentional actions.

[8] More on this in Chapter II and IV.

The endorser of the Guidance Theory of Action could argue, instead, as Frankfurt (1978) does, that the movements that the drug addict executes in preparing and assuming his or her substance are under his or her own guidance, as he or she has the possibility to intervene on his or her movements. Despite being performed out of an urge that the drug addict cannot control, the movement that the drug addict executes in preparing and assuming his or her drug require his body control, and together with it they plausibly also involve the formation of a number of intentions that guide the whole procedure that the subject undergoes to assume the drug. This might be sufficient to attribute to his or her movement a relevant degree of intentionality, and with it the status of actions.[9] However, as addictions are not in the main focus of this dissertation I will not discuss the topic further. Rather, I will proceed by discussing those actions that agents perform "out of habit," habitual actions.

Recapitulating what has been observed so far about habits and about what distinguishes them from other phenomena with which they share some similarities, we can claim that:

> Habits are acquired dispositions to perform certain actions in certain situations to which they become associated through repetition, and they are not associated

[9] More on this topic in Chapter IV.

with the strong desires or with the urges that dependency brings about.

This distinguishes them from innate dispositions that are not *acquired* through *repetition* of the same kind of action in the same kind of situation, which might include, e.g., also instincts but most importantly character or personality traits, which can be acquired in different ways and manifest themselves in a variety of manners. It distinguishes them from skills, as skills, as we have seen, are acquired disposition to perform certain actions in a certain way, as they explain indeed the way in which an agent performs certain actions, the "how" rather than the "why" he or she performs it. And finally, it distinguishes them from addiction or compulsions, as those latter are, unlike habits, associated with strong urges or desires and symptoms of abstinence that can be physically painful, as in the case of abstinence from certain drugs or alcohol to which one became addicted, or "mentally painful" as the abstinence might bring about highly unpleasant feelings, depressive moods, anxiety, and other similar states.

3. Habitual actions and other kind of behaviors

Habitual actions are those actions that we perform "out of habit", without having in mind what we are doing, in those situations to which the related

habits are associated. Paradigmatic simple cases of habitual actions are turning on the light when entering a dark room, turning off the alarm clock as it rings in the morning, typing the password as we turn on our laptop. But habitual actions can also extend longer through time and involve sequences of (habitual) actions. Those are, for instance, routines that we perform on a daily basis, such as preparing breakfast, driving to work on any week-day, or bringing out our dog out daily at the same time of the day.

Those actions all share some characteristics. They have become habitual through repetition in the appropriate situations and, as they became habitual, it is normally possible for the agent to execute them with a substantially reduced mental and physical effort compared to when they performed them for the first time.[10] This also allows the agent to perform them simultaneously with execution of other perhaps more difficult tasks. This way people can drive to work while listening to the music, conversating with another passenger, organizing the day, planning what to have for dinner, remembering an interaction had some months before, or thinking about what to do on New Year's Eve.

Habitual actions fulfil at least to some extent most of the criteria typically associated with automaticity: lack of deliberation or decisional processes, reduced conscious awareness of what one is doing, reduced effort, and

[10] An excellent description of some of the main effects of habituation can be found William James's Principles of Psychology (1891).

efficiency in terms of attentional resources and a significantly reduced need for control (Bargh, 1994; Moors & De Houwer, 2006). Because of this, habitual actions are sometimes placed within a larger group of actions labeled "automatic actions" (e.g., Di Nucci, 2011; Lumer, 2017, 2019). However, to which extent it is right to label habitual actions "automatic actions" might be a matter of controversy and largely depends on how automaticity is defined, which is itself a controversial topic, which I have no space to discuss in this chapter.

Just as habits must be distinguished by other kinds of dispositions with which they share some characteristics, habitual actions must be distinguished by other kinds of behavior with which they could be confused.[11] In what follows I will distinguish habitual actions form reflexes, sub-intentional actions, and skilled actions. I will then propose a characterization of habitual actions that emphasizes the most salient traits that are common to all actions of this kind as well as those characteristics that habitual actions have which helps us to distinguish them from the just mentioned similar kinds of actions and behaviors.

3.1 Habitual actions and reflexes

William James (1891:112) claimed, in his *Principles of Psychology*, that the most complex habitual actions are from the mechanical point of view

[11] Importantly, habitual actions must *in primis* be distinguished by mere bodily movements which are not actions. This is a large topic which find its space in Chapter IV.

"nothing but *concatenated* discharges in the nerve centres, due to the presence there of systems of reflex paths." This description, which can be largely misleading, brings about an important point: that habitual actions and reflexes share some similarities which might lead us to confuse the two phenomena. Just as reflexes, habitual actions are characterized by a lack of preceding deliberation, low effort, and reduce awareness – and this suggests an analogy with the fixed patterns of behavior characteristic of reflexes. However, there are also important differences between typical cases of reflexes, such as quickly withdrawing our hand if we mistakenly touch a flame, and habitual actions, such as turning on the light when entering a dark room.

One of the most salient differences between habitual action and reflexes is that we have a degree of control over habitual actions which we lack over reflexes. We have the possibility to intervene, to a large extent, on our performances of habitual actions but not on our reflexes (cf. Pollard, 2006b). Indeed, most of the time that we decide not to perform a habitual action we succeed in doing so: we can decide to go to work by bus rather than by car, to skip breakfast before a blood test, or to not pick up the phone when it rings, and normally we would end up going to work by bus, skipping breakfast on that day, and ignoring the ringing phone. We cannot decide in the same way though, and succeed as easily, whether or not to

withdraw our hand from the fire, or not to blink when something hurts our eyes. That would be extremely difficult, if possible at all.[12]

Moreover, the actions that are habitual to us can change over time as we change our habits, e.g., abandon the habit of driving our car to work and adopt the more environmentally friendly habit of going by public transport, until the latter action will become the one habitual to us. But plausibly we cannot permanently modify our reflexes — and, if we could, that would require an incommensurately strong effort.

Finally, if we were to choose to act by reflex, the action thereby executed would not be reflex-like. Indeed, it is characteristic of reflexes that they are performed fast and overcome decisional processes. If we decided to perform the kind of behaviors usually performed by reflex, we would rather perform an action, but this would be slower and lose those characteristics proper of reflexes. By contrast, if we deliberately decided to perform an action that is in *normally* performed out of habit, the result would arguably not differ as significantly: such an action would not be habitual in the sense of initiated "just out of habit", but the procedure involved would be rather similar.

[12] The same can be said of bodily process, though it is more difficult to confuse bodily processes with habitual actions. Even if we might be able to intervene on bodily processes, such as respiration, this ability is extremely limited. One can decide not to breathe for a certain amount of time, but she cannot decide not to breathe at all (cf. Pollard, 2006a).

3.2 Habitual actions and sub-intentional actions

Examples of sub-intentional actions are playing with one's hair while talking, distractedly tapping with one's foot in time with the music, stretching one's legs after sitting for an extended period of time, or biting one's nails when feeling nervous. Just like habitual actions, sub-intentional actions involve the repetition of certain activities, which tend to happen always in certain situations. Because of this, in our ordinary language we might group such actions together with habitual actions.

A first difference I can see between this kind of actions and habitual actions – the way I think about them – lies in the specificity of the situation to which such actions are associated. Habitual actions involve the repetition of certain actions in the exact situation to which they are associated through repetition: driving to work in the morning, picking up the phone when it rings. Studies have shown (e.g., Neal *et al.*, 2011) that changing the context in which a habitual action is performed is sufficient to disrupt the performance of such an action.[13] Sub-intentional actions such as playing with one's hair or biting one's nails when feeling nervous are execute in a variety of situations and are more likely to be responses to a certain emotional state of the agent rather than to cues in the environment that trigger the exercise of a certain associated habit. Similarly, stretching one's legs after sitting for long time is likely to be a

[13] More on this Chapter II.

behavioral response to a feeling of discomfort generated by the prolonged sitting. Habitual actions are *not*, instead, responses to emotional states or feelings of discomfort.

Furthermore, although the connection between habitual actions and goals might get looser through time,[14] habitual actions — even those we might want to get rid of — are developed through repetition of *intended* actions in certain situations and are typically aimed at achieving a certain goal.

We might start drinking coffee in the morning because it helps us to feel awake or to concentrate on our work, and this is a result we intend to obtain. We might start smoking because we feel good when we do it – though such a feeling might not persist over time – or because we want to feel part of a certain group of people. We might develop the habits of exercising regularly with the intention to keep fit, and we develop the habit of going to work by car because we want to get to our workplace faster and have more time flexibility.

Some habits might have been inculcated in us by our parents, such as the habit of holding the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right hand, or the habit of taking off the shoes when entering the house. While at the age we developed such habits, we did not have a clear goal of, for instance, eating as in accordance with the etiquette or of keeping the house clean, we likely had a goal of acting as our parents wished, not

14 See, e.g., Wood et al. (2007) and Neal et al. (2011).

disappointing them, or being rewarded for behaving well. Thus, even those habits were developed in connection with goal, which likely have changed or disappeared as we grew up.

Moreover, that we acquire certain habits having a goal becomes even clearer if we think that, in order to acquire certain habits, we usually have to apply some effort. We might need to concentrate, to learn acting in a different way, or simply to continuously remind us to do something until that action becomes habitual. Many of those actions often sold as "healthy habits", such as regular body exercising, yoga routine, or jogging are good examples of actions that require significant effort to be made habitual

In some aspects, my view here resembles Pollard's (2006a, b) view of habits. He claims indeed that habitual actions have some sort of "intrinsic" intentionality due to their teleological structure. That is, they have a purpose or goal, and this is what grants them the status of *actions,* as opposed to mere behaviors. However, the goals that such actions have in Pollard's view might be intrinsic to the actions and have nothing to do with the agent's *intention* of performing such actions. This becomes clearer if we consider some of the examples that Pollard (2006b) provides. In his view the purpose nail-biting, which he regards as a habitual action, is that the nails are bitten and the purpose of driving home following a certain path is that one gets home in the usual way.

This seems true though of any action and it might be true even of mere behaviors or bodily processes: there is a sense in which of them have a

goal or purpose, which need not necessarily be related to an agent's initial intention to perform them. For instance, the purpose of breathing is introducing oxygen a creature's body, though no creature need *intend* to breathe, at any time, in order to achieve it.

In my view, instead, driving home following the usual path is a habitual action while nail-biting is not. This is so because the agent once intended to follow a certain path, he or she intended to go straight, or to turn left or right at a certain intersection, and such action later became to him or her habitual and thus to an important extent automatized, so that it might no longer require an intention of the agent in order to be executed. I regard nail-biting, instead, a sub-intentional action. This because tendency to bite one's nails was not acquired through repetition of an intended action, as plausibly the agent never intended to bite his or her nails. He or she likely did so *sub-intentionally*, even when doing it for the first time.

Sub-intentional actions might also have a purpose. Stretching one's legs could have the purpose of improving blood circulation, playing with one's hair might help reduce stress. But it is not necessary that an agent intended to perform such actions in order to achieve the respective goals.

3.3 Habitual actions and skilled actions

Finally, I want to distinguish habitual actions from skilled actions. This distinction might sound partially redundant, as good part of what

distinguishes habitual and skilled actions is the fact that they are connected to different dispositions – habits and skills, respectively. Furthermore, the distinction between habitual and skilled actions will be addressed in more detail in the third chapter of this dissertation, where I will argue that some of the subsidiary actions involved in the performance of skilled activities are habitual actions. However, it could be helpful to emphasize here again that skilled action are all actions that can be explained by a certain skill, which explains specifically *how* such actions are executed, and that this kind of actions do not include only highly complex activities.

Indeed, there is a general tendency, when we talk about skills, to focus on highly complex skills, such as the physical skills exhibited by expert athletes, or job-related skills that require years of studies to be acquired. Yet, skilled actions can also be very simple perform, as not all skills require years of studying and practice. For instance, walking can also be considered a skilled action, as it is allowed by one's possessing the skill of walking. In this sense, an action can be habitual and skilled at the same time.

Consider Jan's biking to school: for Jan, biking to school on every weekday is a habitual action, as it is what he does, out of habit, on any school day. Yet, it is also a skilled action, as he had to learn to bike before being able to do it every day: it is because he has the skill of biking that he can go to school by bike. As Douskos (2017) already emphasized, it is

not contradictory to say that an action is both skilled and habitual, as habits and skills explain different aspects of that action: respectively, *why* and *how* it is performed.

It is important to keep in mind though, that, while actions can be *habitual* and *skilled* at the same time, it is not the same to say that an action is habitual as it is to say that an action is skilled. Despite a number of authors using those two terms interchangeably (see Chapter III), in my view, when we use the terms "skilled" we pick up a certain aspect of the action (that it requires a certain skill or technique to be executed), while when we use the term "habitual" we emphasize that it is an action performed out of habit, with a certain regularity.

As skilled activities will be the main focus of chapter III, however, I will not discuss them further here. Summarizing instead the core characteristics of habitual actions, we can finally claim that

> Habitual actions are actions explained by the agent's habits. Habituation reduces the attention and effort needed for their execution, so that they can be executed simultaneously with the execution of other, more difficult tasks. However, their execution is normally *controllable* by the agent and preserves a connection to the agent's *goals* and *intentions* that underlay the development of the associated habits.

This characterization emphasizes the most salient traits common to all habitual actions and summarizes the main effects of habituation. Habitual actions are explained by the agent's habits: that is, out of habit, the agent repeats them in the specific situation to which they become associated over time. Moreover, due to the effect of habituation, the involve a reduced effort and need for attention, and their execution is compatible with that of other activities. Furthermore, this characterization distinguishes habitual actions from reflexes, on which we can exercise little to no control, from sub-intentional actions, less tied to specific situations and to the agent's goals and intentions, and from skilled actions, which are explained by the agent's skills rather than by his or her habits – although actions can be at the same time skilled and habitual.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided a characterization of habits and habitual actions and emphasized the main traits that distinguish them from related dispositions and actions or behaviors respectively. I argued that habits are acquired dispositions to perform certain actions in certain situations to which they become associated through repetition which are not associated with the strong desires or with the urges that dependency brings about. This characterization distinguishes them from dispositions that affect our way of acting but that do not provoke the repetition of specific behaviors

in specific situations, such as character traits, from innate dispositions, such as instincts, which are not acquired by repetition. It distinguishes them from skills, as skills are acquired dispositions to perform actions in a certain way, explaining *how* we perform certain actions rather than *why* we perform them. Finally, it distinguishes them from addictions and compulsions, which, unlike habits, are associated to strong desires and relevant symptoms of abstinence. I argued then that habitual actions are habitual actions are those actions explained by the agent's habits, which, due to the effect of the habituation process, can be performed with a reduced effort and need for attention, so that their execution is normally compatible with that of other tasks. Their execution, unlike that of reflexes, is normally controllable by the agent and, differently from that of sub-intentional actions, it preserves a relevant connection to the agent's goals and intentions which underlay the development of the associated habits.

Now that we have clarified the concept of habits and habitual actions as they will be employed in the next chapters, we can proceed to tackle the main issue which recently captured the interest of a number of philosophers: the challenge that habitual actions pose to the Causal Theory of Action.

Chapter 2: Habitual Actions as a Challenge to the Causal Theory of Action

1. Introduction

Turning on the light when entering a dark room, typing the password as we turn on our laptop, or walking to the right bus stop in the morning are just some of the many actions that we normally execute out of habit, *habitual actions*. For a long time neglected in the philosophy of action, such actions gained recently substantial attention as a number of philosophers (Pollard 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2010; Di Nucci 2008, 2011, 2013; Douskos, 2017a) argued that they might pose a challenge to the Causal Theory of Action – roughly speaking, the theory that what distinguishes actions from other events is that only the formers are appropriately caused by the agent's psychological states.

In this chapter, I will discuss three arguments in favor of the claim that habitual actions *do not* require causation by the agent's psychological states and therefore the Causal Theory of Action cannot adequately account for them. I will examine the replies that advocates of Causal Theory might provide to such arguments – or at least those I can think of – and I will reject them as unsatisfactory. Finally, I will sketch an alternative explanation for habitual actions that does not appeal to causation by the agent's psychological states but rather to the agent's habits and to the triggering role of the situations to which such habits are

associated. I will conclude that, together, the reasonable dissatisfaction with the replies of the advocates of the Causal Theory to the arguments presented here and the availability of an alternative explanation for habitual actions provide enough support for the claim that the agent's psychological states are indeed unneeded for the causation of habitual actions and therefore such actions represent a challenge to the Causal Theory of Action.[15] This conclusion raises important issues for action theorists, concerning for instance the individuation and the intentionality of action, which will be partially discussed in the last chapter, but which should also motivate further research on the topic.

2. Habitual Actions and the Causal Theory of Action

The Causal Theory of Action provided a popular solution to what Frankfurt (1978) characterized as the main question that philosophers of action should aim to address, which he himself labeled the Problem of Action: that of explicating the contrast between what an agent *does* and what merely happens to the agent. According to this theory, what distinguishes actions from mere events happening to the agent is that actions are *intentional*, and they are so in virtue of being caused by the agent's psychological states. More in detail, according to the Causal

[15] This claim differs from the claim that habitual actions are *never* caused by psychological states, or that it is an essential characteristic of habitual actions that psychological states play no role in their causation. More on this will come later.

Theory, an event is an action only if it is intentional under some description,[16] and it is intentional only if it is (non-deviantly[17]) caused by the agent's psychological states.

In the earliest versions of this theory, such psychological states were taken to be combinations of desires and means-ends beliefs (Davidson, 1963). Accordingly, events would count as actions only if the agent had a desire (broadly understood) and a belief about how such desire could be satisfied that together (and non-deviantly) caused such events. In other words:

> An agent *A*' *φ*-ing is an action of A *iff A* has a desire to *ψ*, she believes that *φ*-ing is a way to *ψ*, and this desire-belief pair causes (nondeviantly) A's *φ*-ing.

[16] As we will see in more in detail later, actions can be described in different ways. For instance, one's action of *turning on the light* can be correctly described as 'flipping the light switch', or 'illuminating the room.' What matters for movements to count as actions is that there is at least one description under which they are intentional.

[17] The following is an example of deviant causation. Mayra is driving home with the intention to kill her aunt Olga by adding the poison she has in her bag into her aunt's afternoon tea. Such an intention is causing a lot of stress in Mayra and it is distracting her from driving. She becomes so distracted that she does not notice a pedestrian crossing the street just in front of her car and runs over the pedestrian. When she gets out of her car, she finds out that the pedestrian is death and suddenly becomes aware that such a pedestrian is her aunt Olga. It might be said here that Mayra's intention to kill Olga caused the death of Olga, but it caused it in a deviant way. For a discussion of deviant causation see, e.g., Peacocke (1979, Ch. II).

For instance, Anne's turning the door handle is an action of Anne if and only if she has a desire, e.g., of entering the room, she believes that turning the door handle is a way of satisfying her desire, and such a desire and belief combined cause (non-deviantly) Anne's turning the door handle.

More modern versions of the Causal Theory appeal, however, to causation by *intentions*, which are now widely conceived as *sui generis* psychological states, non-reducible to belief-desire pairs but involving in addition a commitment to an action plan which plays a function in regulating the agent's future behavior and practical reasoning (see Bratman, 1987).[18] Accordingly, the movements of an agent can be considered actions only if they are appropriately caused by the agent's intentions.

In this chapter, I will focus on these recent versions of the theory; however, the challenge that habitual actions pose to the Causal Theory of Action arguably applies to all versions since what has been questioned (e.g., by Di Nucci, 2011) is that habitual actions are caused by any of the psychological states mentioned above.

Habitual actions are actions typically performed without having in mind what one is doing, "out of habit," in the situations to which they become associated through repetition. Paradigmatic cases are actions such as turning on the light when entering a dark room, walking to the bus stop

[18] Sinhababu (2017) represents an exception to this trend.

as we get out on weekdays mornings, typing the password as we turn on the laptop, or opening the browser and checking the email as we sit in front of the computer. Such actions became habitual through their repetitive execution in the associated situations, and they are often characterized as performed "automatically,"[19] involving little or no attention and conscious awareness (e.g., Pollard, 2010; Di Nucci, 2011) and thus leaving us free to concentrate on different and likely more effortful tasks.

Most importantly, habitual actions do not seem to require any decision to be taken before they are performed. We often engage in such activities barely realizing that we are doing so, such as when we distractedly walk to the bus stop while absorbed in our thoughts. And sometimes we even end up performing habitual actions despite having decided to act otherwise, for instance taking the bus to our workplace on a public holiday while having different plans for the day or driving straight home after work despite having formed an intention to stop at the supermarket on the way.

The lack of decisional processes that seems to precede the performance of habitual action is what brought philosophers such as Chan (1995), Ruben (2003), Pollard (2003, 2006a, b, 2010) and Di Nucci (2008, 2011,

[19] Di Nucci (2011), for instance, considers habitual actions a type of *automatic action*. Whether it is correct to do so might be a matter of controversy and largely depends on how 'automaticity' is defined. See, e.g., Schneider & Shiffrin (1977), Bargh (1994) and Moors & De Houwer (2006) for well-known characterizations of automaticity.

2013) to think that the Causal Theory cannot provide an adequate account for these actions. Indeed, intentions as traditionally conceived are output of practical reasoning, a form of decisional process concerning the course of action to undertake. As we will see, advocates of the Causal Theory tried to accommodate habitual actions within the framework of the Causal Theory by appealing to some sort of non-decisional intentions (Mele, 1992; Clarke, 2010; Roughley, 2016; and Fridland, 2017), which I will group here under the label "habitual intentions." I will argue instead that (habitual) intentions are not required at all for the causation of habitual actions and therefore the challenge that they represent for the Causal Theory of Action is real.

It is worth pointing out, before proceeding, that habitual intentions differ from other two kinds of intentions that sometimes appear in the most recent literature of the philosophy of action: intentions in action (Searle, 1983) and motor intentions (e.g., Jeannerod, 1997; Pacherie, 2000; Clarke, 2010). Habitual intentions are still conceived as preceding and causing the correspondent actions, whilst intentions in action are characterize as simultaneous with the action execution and cause of the bodily movements involved. Di Nucci (2011) argues that intentions in action are of no help to the advocate of the Causal Theory as, being simultaneous with the action execution, for a matter of contiguity in causality, they cannot be the cause of habitual actions. In any case, Searle himself concede that not all actions are caused by intentions, and what is

at stake in this paper is whether the causal explanation that the Causal Theory provides for action applies to habitual actions. That is, what matters here is whether habitual actions are caused by intentions and not whether there are intentions which are *simultaneous* with the execution of habitual actions.

Motor intentions – as we will see more in detail in Chapter III – instead are generally characterized as hierarchically organized representations of the movements involved in performing certain actions which play the role of guiding the agent's execution of such actions. They are typically conceived as inaccessible to the agent's consciousness, and they differ substantially from the traditional conception of intentions adopted by the advocates of the Causal Theory to the point that one might doubt that it is appropriate to call them "intentions." As with intentions in action, whether these *sui generis* kinds of intentions are involved in habitual actions is not relevant for the purpose of this chapter.

Importantly, the claim that intentions are not required at all for the causation of habitual actions differs from the claim that habitual actions are necessarily not caused by intentions, that there is an incompatibility between an action being habitual and it being intended. There are several reasons why I am not arguing here for this stronger claim. One is, because habituation can be a gradual process, and the more we are habituated to perform a certain action in a certain situation, the more such action is likely to be performed without an intention to do so.

Acquiring a new habit, such as that of doing a workout routine in the morning, initially requires some effort. We might for instance remind ourselves to do it, and we might also need to motivate ourselves, indeed, while habit decreases the perceived effort to execute a certain acidity, acquiring a new habit can be a quite effortful process, and it is common knowledge that many struggle acquiring healthy routines such as doing physical activity in the morning. Executing such action is then a fully intended process. As the habit gets stronger though, we start executing the action in question "automatically", without thinking.

However, there could be a stage in the process of habituation in which intentions are still required for the execution of habitual actions, or at least in which they are required in certain conditions, for instance depending on the physical and psychological state of the agent. For instance, if the agent had a bad night sleep, she might have to reflect on what to do and form an intention to do her morning workout in order to get it done – even though she normally starts executing such action without thinking. In this case, we might still say that she has the habit of doing a workout routine in the morning and thus that doing a workout routine in the morning is for her a habitual action.

Also, it is possible that within the execution of certain sequences of habitual actions which involve numerous actions, and which we might call "habitual sequences," the agent performs some intended actions. An example of habitual sequence might be *driving to work*. In driving to

work, an agent performs many habitual actions, such as stopping at the red traffic light, changing gear when required, and turning left or right at a certain intersection. Likely, there are times when the agent needs to think and form an intention to act despite normally being able to execute the same actions in the same situations without needing to do so. The idea that it is incompatible for an action to be habitual and intended, held, for instance, by Douskos (2017), might depend on particular choices made in characterizing habitual actions which I did not make here.[20] Thus, if one has a habit of φ-ing in a situation *S*, arguably, φ-ing remains a habitual action of her even if at times she needs to form an intention to φ in *S*; that is, it is *not* an essential characteristic of habitual actions that they are not caused by intentions.

Moreover, if our concern here is showing that habitual actions pose a real challenge to the Causal Theory of Action, it is enough for us to show that there are some cases of habitual actions which are not caused by intentions.

3. The Argument from Phenomenology

An important problem that advocates of the Causal Theory face is that of accounting for the phenomenological difference between habitual and

[20] For further discussion on this issue see Douskos (2017, 2018, 2019).

non-habitual (or "strategic") actions (cf. Di Nucci, 2011). Consider indeed the following cases:

1. Sylvia buys a ticket to Vietnam
2. As she enters a dark room, Sylvia searches for the light switch

The Causal Theory of Action would provide a similar explanation for both Sylvia's actions: such actions would be both caused by intentions, for instance and intention to travel to Vietnam and an intention to turn on the light.

Buying a ticket to Vietnam, however, plausibly required for Sylvia a lot of planning, wondering whether Vietnam is the best place where to spend her holidays this year, searching for the right travel friend, thinking whether the plan is worth the money, comparing prices of flights and accommodations, and maybe confronting them with those of other possible destinations. By contrast, searching for the light switch when entering the room did not require Sylvia to think; she simply started running her hand along the wall in search of the light switch.

To do justice to the difference between the two kinds of action, advocates of the Causal Theory postulated different sorts of automatically generated intentions which I call here "habitual intentions." What all these sorts of intentions have in common is that, differently from more traditional kinds

of intentions they do not issue from deliberative processes but are rather triggered by certain situations and cause the performance of those actions which are habitual in such situations.

Roughley (2016: 266) provided an argument for the existence of such intentions, which appeals to phenomenological evidence:

> When the alarm rings in the morning, that appears to trigger the habitual formation of the intention to get up… One sort of evidence for this would be the thoughts that the agent might have if another agent were to employ means to dissuade him or her from getting up at that moment.

In line with this argument, intentions can be formed "out of habit" triggered by the situations to which habitual actions are associated. If an agent has the habit of getting up when the alarm rings in the morning, the ringing of the alarm will trigger in her the formation of an intention to get up, which then causes her to get up. The evidence for this is that the agent would oppose if prevented to act in accordance with her habit, or at least be reluctant to act otherwise.

Importantly, Roughley never claims that all habitual actions are caused by intentions, he only aims at showing that *at least some* habitual actions

are caused by habitually formed intentions. His claim is thus compatible with the claim that some habitual actions are not caused by intentions or equivalent psychological states, and therefore that habitual actions do not necessarily require to be caused by the agent's psychological states. However, someone might want to extend Roughley's argument and claim that *all* habitual actions are caused by habitual intention, for instance because there might be no relevant criteria to distinguish habitual actions that are caused by habitual intentions from those who are not. It is against this stronger thesis that I am arguing here.

I can think of two possible replies to this argument. First, one might reply that the agent's reluctance to act against her habit is attributable to the strength of the habit itself rather than to an underlying causal intention. If one who has a habit such as that of getting up when the alarm rings and experiences discomfort when prevented to execute her habitual action, the discomfort experienced might easily be an indicator of a particularly strong habit rather than of an underlying causal intention.

A second reply might be that the thoughts and discomfort that an agent experiences when her habitual routine is interrupted are attributable to the interruption itself and arise as the agent is forced to reflect on her course of action. There are (at least) two different ways in which the agent can

act: out of habit or "strategically," where, by the latter, I mean here "following decisional processes."[21]

If one has a habit of φ-ing in a situation *S* then, when in S, she would by default φ (unless some impediment is present or unless she decided not to do so). However, if her φ-ing were disrupted, then she would need to reconsider her course of action. She would thus cease to act out of habit and start thinking about how to act. In reconsidering how to act, one might reflect on the consequences of not acting as in accordance with one's habits, or on the reasons why a certain habit was developed, e.g., not being late at work.

Accordingly, the thoughts that an agent might have when her habitual routine is interrupted are attributable to the need of acting "strategically" and the feeling of discomfort that the agent might eventually experience would be likely associated with the mental picturing of the consequences of not performing the relevant habitual actions, rather than to habitual intentions.

Habitual intentions seem unneeded here to explain the experience of the agent in cases such as those presented by Roughley (2016), and therefore such argument provides no sufficient reasons for their postulation.

[21] I allow here for mixed cases, such as in the case of habitually driving to work, where many actions are performed out of habit (such as stopping at the red traffic light) while others are fully intended (such as breaking to let a pedestrian cross). In addition, habitual actions are not the only actions that are not performed after reflection, spontaneous actions are another example, such as getting close to a shop window attracted by a beautiful dress being the glass.

Furthermore, as we will see in the last section of this paper, an alternative explanation for habitual action which does not appeal to causation by the agent's psychological states is available, making the postulation of habitual intentions even less needed.

4. The Argument from Habitual Action Slips

The second argument for the claim that habitual actions do not require causation by the agent's psychological states appeals to habitual action slips. Generally attributed to absent-mindedness, habitual action slips occur when one engages in a habitual sequence of actions or as a result of this. An often-mentioned example can be found in William James's *Principle of Psychology* (James, 1891; Roughley, 2016) and involves a mathematician who enters his bedroom to change his necktie for a dinner party and ends up undressing and going to bed instead. Other cases of habitual action slips tend to occur more often in our daily life, such as driving straight home despite a having decided to stop at the supermarket on the way or taking the bus to our workplace on Sunday morning.

Habitual action slips involve the execution of an action habitual in a certain situation despite an intention to act otherwise. This might suggest that at least some habitual actions – i.e., those involved in habitual actions slips – are not caused by intentions. An argument based on habitual action

slips in favor of the claim that habitual actions do not necessarily require causation by intentions can be constructed as follows:[22]

(P1) If an action φ is caused in a non-deviant way by an intention, then φ is intentional

(P2) Habitual action slips are not intentional

(P3) Habitual action slips are not non-deviantly caused by intentions

(P4) Habitual action slips are habitual actions

(CO) Not all habitual actions are caused by intentions

The first premise simply states that events caused by intention – let aside cases of deviant causation – are intentional. It is important to remember

[22] A sketch of an argument against the Causal Theory of Action's explanation for habitual actions based of habitual action slips can be found in Douskos (2017). Douksos argues that things that can be explained by habits cannot be explained by the idea of habitual intentions because the idea of intention itself does not allow for a discordance between the idea that habit might be manifested unintentionally (through action slips) and the very idea of intentions as psychological states whose content is a plan (cf. Bratman, 1987). I do not agree with this argument since, as I mentioned above, I do not believe that the idea of intentions (including habitual intentions) is incompatible with an action (such as a habitual action) being performed unintentionally. Unintentional actions are performed in the act of doing something intentionally, such as misreading in the act of reading or miscalculating in the act of calculating (Davidson, 1971), thus the unintentionality of an action by itself does not imply that such an action is not caused by an intention. Furthermore, differently from Douskos I do not aim here at arguing that habitual actions are not caused by intentions, but just that *some* of them are not, which implies that intentions are not necessary for habitual actions. finally, I aim at discussing more in depth the case of habitual action slips and to examine (and reject) the replies that could be provided against my argument.

here that 'intentional' means "intentional under a certain description," and this makes intentional many actions caused by intentions that in our ordinary language we label 'unintentional,' e.g., mistakes done in the act of doing something intentionally, such as misinterpreting a sentence in the act of interpreting it (Davidson, 1971). Even though the agent never forms an intention to misinterpret, her action is caused by an intention, that of interpreting, and this makes *misinterpreting* an intentional action under the description "interpreting."

Plausibly in line with our intuitions, (P2) claims that habitual action slips are not intentional, indeed they involve the execution of habitual actions despite an intention to act otherwise. Considering the above example, it sounds plausible that the mathematician who entered the bedroom to change his necktie never intended to keep undressing and entering his bed. As we will see, however, a reply that advocates of the Causal Theory might advance consists in denying this claim. (P3) simply follows from (P1) and (P2). The last premise, (P4), just states that habitual actions slips are cases of habitual actions: habitual actions performed out of habit in the associated situations. Finally, the conclusion (CO), that *not all* habitual actions are caused by intentions, follows: if habitual actions slips are cases of habitual actions and they are not (non-deviantly) caused by intentions, then not all habitual actions are caused by intention. This implies that habitual actions do not necessitate causation by the agent's intentions, i.e., that intentions are *not required* for executing such actions.

One might want to go further and argue that action slips just show an intrinsic characteristic of habitual actions, i.e., that they are not (never) caused by intentions. But again, arguing for this stronger conclusion is not in the scope of this paper.

There are two lines of replying I can think of. Firstly, one might deny (P2) by allowing for inconsistent intentions. An agent might have at the same time a decisional intention to act differently from her habit and a habitual intention. For instance, in the case of someone taking the bus to her workplace on Sunday morning, the advocate of the Causal Theory might say that the agent has a decisional intention and a habitual intention. The decisional intentions might be, e.g., an intention to go to a nice park outside the city, and the habitual intention, which is triggered by the situation, is that of taking the bus to her workplace. The advocates of the Causal Theory would say that his latter intention finally determines the course of action that the agent undertakes. Thus, when no sufficient attention is paid – one might say – habitual intentions typically overwrite decisional intentions.

A reason to reject this reply, however, is that appealing to inconsistent intention would require us to accept the claim that agents of habitual action slips are irrational. Indeed, intentions are nowadays conceived as involving commitments to courses of action, which also provides them with a regulatory function on the agents' future behaviors and practical reasoning (Bratman, 1987). Thus, if an agent intends to φ, then the agent

commits herself to φ – or at least to try to do so. However, if one has an intention to φ and, at the same time, she also has an intention inconsistent with this – say, an intention to ψ where ψ implies not φ-ing – then she commits herself to two incompatible plans and therefore she is irrational. Consider the following example:

> On a Sunday morning, Evelyn decides to take a bus, bus 54, to exit the city and go relaxing in a nice park outside the city. Nonetheless, out of habit, she jumps on bus 32, the bus she habitually takes to her workplace.

One could argue here that she has two inconsistent intentions: an intention to take bus 54, issuing from a decisional process, and a habitual intention of taking bus 32, this latter formed out of habit in the associated situation. If intentions involve commitment to action plans, by intending to take bus 54 Evelyn commits herself to (try to) take that bus, and she will not think again about her Sunday plan unless new relevant information, such as forecasts predicting rain, will make opportune to do so. But if she also intends, out of habit, to (try to) take the bus she takes to her workplace, bus 32, then she also commits herself to take this other bus. Since the two plans are incompatible, she would be irrational. Agents of action slips, however, are likely distracted and preys of their habits but not necessarily

irrational, failure to pay attention and not irrationality seems indeed to be the cause of habitual action slips. If it is so, this provides us a reason to reject this reply.

The second line of reply, also based on a rejection of (P2), is to say that habitual action slips are intentional under some description. Notably, this reply does not appeal to habitual intentions. As we have seen, mistakes can be done in the act of doing something intentionally, as misreading in the act of reading. Amaya (2013) argued that when one slips, out of habit, she acts with an intention, yet she fails to act in accordance with her preference, with what she would have liked to do. One might argue, for instance, that one who drives straight home despite initially intending to stop at the supermarket still acts in an intention, that of driving home, but she fails to act accordingly with her preference, i.e., that of doing so by making a stop at the supermarket on the way.

The problem with this reply is that it does not provide a complete explanation of what happens in the case of habitual action slips. To see why it is so, consider again the above example. Evelyn's intention to go outside the city does not explain why the agent jumps on the habitual bus to work. The situation, her habit, and her absent-mindedness would more likely do so. But we lack then the very intention that causes the agent to jump on bus 32, the bus to her workplace, and if Evelyn's jumping on bus 32 is an action the advocate of the Causal Theory needs an intention to cause it. If such an intention is a habitual intention, inconsistent with the

agent's plan to exit the city, then we are back to the problem of the previous reply. If instead the very action of jumping on bus 32 were not caused by an intention at all, then we would have a case of habitual actions not being caused by intentions, which shows that intentions are not necessarily required for the causation of habitual actions.

5. The Argument from Conflicting Motives

The final argument relies on the results of a number of empirical studies, which suggest that, as habits develop, the connection between the agent's motives and the habitual actions that she performs loosen, while the triggering role of the situations to which such actions are associated increases (e.g., Oulette & Wood, 1998; Wood *et al*., 2005; Neal *et al*. 2006, 2009, 2011; Wood *et al*., 2005, 2007, Verplanken *et al*., 1997, 1998, 2008; Verplanken & Wood 2006).

The motives of an action are defined as the ultimate desires of an agent that explains the agent performance of such an action, or features of it (Sverdlik, 2011). In line with the common terminology in action theory, and unlike it is done by some authors in the psychological literature, I will often use "(predominant) desires" instead of "motives." Intentions, although no longer considered reducible to belief-desire pairs, are considered to involve predominant desires (and beliefs), in addition to further components, such as commitments to courses of actions. So, *prima*

facie, it seems plausible to think that if habitual actions are independent from the agent's (predominant) desires and such desires are the most essential part of intentions, then habitual actions are also independent form the agent's intentions. This argument will be discussed in more detail below; but, before that, I will briefly present a study conducted by Neal *et al.* (2011), which helps to illustrate the relationship between the agent's motive and the habitual actions that she performs.

In order to identify the factors influencing the maintenance or disruption of habitual action performances, Neal and Wood conducted a study on habitual popcorn eaters based on two experiments. Study participants were provided with either fresh or stale popcorn, those latter popped one week before. In the first experiment, the authors compared then the percentage of popcorn that the participants ate in a usual versus an unusual context, that is, in a cinema and in a meeting room. While in the second experiment they compared the percentage of popcorn eaten in the usual versus a novel way, i.e., using their dominant versus using the non-dominant hand. The results of both experiments showed that the percentage of popcorn eaten was not influenced by the quality of the popcorn, nor was it influenced by the participants' hunger. Rather, the determinant factors influencing the percentage of popcorn eaten were the context and the possibility of eating in the usual way: the participants ate the highest percentage of popcorn in the cinema and by using their dominant hands. These results suggest that the situation plays a

fundamental role in triggering the performance of habitual actions, such as popcorn eating, and that the possibility of performing such actions in the usual way promotes their execution independently of the agent's motives. Indeed, those factors that might have generated motives in the agents, such as the pleasure given by eating good quality popcorn and hunger, were shown to be of little relevance.[23] From this, the authors also concluded that altering the context and the manner in which habitual actions are typically performed is more efficacious for disrupting performances of habitual actions than it is to work on the agents' motivations for performing them.

Based on the empirical funding on the relationship between the agent's motives and the habitual actions she performs, an argument for the claim that habitual actions do not require causation by intentions can be constructed as follows:

(P1) Intentions necessarily involve motives

(P2) If A is not motivated to φ in S (and it is not forced to φ in S), then A does not intend to φ in S

[23] I respond here to the objection that the participants could still find more pleasurable to eat no good qualities popcorn than not to eat popcorn at all. As Neal and colleagues (2011) themselves state, the popcorn used in the experiment were *stale* popcorn popped one week before. Thus, the pleasure that non hungry participants could get through eating them is unlikely to affect their eating behavior and the most plausible explanation for the difference in their eating behavior between the two situations is that the two different situations are what trigger in habitual popcorn eaters different behaviors.

(P3) It is possible for A, out of habit, to φ in S and yet not be motivated (or forced) to do so

(CO) It is therefore possible for A, out of habit, to φ in S without intending to do so.

The first premise is simply in line with the traditional conception of intentions as involving desires and believes. Indeed, it is not questioned in the philosophical literature that the predominant desires that an agent has, her motives, are a constituent part of its intentions. What is a matter of controversy is instead whether intentions involve *more* than such desires and beliefs on how to realize them (Bratman, 1987).[24] The second premise is an implication of (P1): if motives, or predominant desires, are constituent parts of intentions, and the agent lacks a motive to act in a certain way, then the agent does not have an intention to act in such a way. An extensive discussion of the kind of desires involved in undertaking a course of action can be found in Sinhababu (2017). It is sufficient to clarify here that predominant desires are about the goal that the agent wants to achieve, and that other desires can be required for the causation of those subsidiary actions involved in the realization of the agent's main goal. For instance, an agent who buys a flight ticket to Vietnam has as a

[24] It is also questioned (outside the discussion concerning habitual actions) whether "intending" is necessary to act, or whether *endeavoring* might suffice. For discussion, see Bratman's (1987). However, endeavoring just as much as intending involves the agent's predominant desires.

main goal that of going to Vietnam. His desire to go to Vietnam guides the actions involved in buying the flight ticket by generating for instance the desire to get the best deal, which itself gives rise to the desire to compare the prices on different websites. What is important here is that the agent has a predominant desire and that such desire guides her course of actions. What seems to emerge, instead, from the study that Neal and colleagues conducted, is that habitual actions can be performed independently of such desires.

Eating popcorn in a cinema could be motivated by the desire to get pleasure through eating something tasty but eating stale popcorn does not give the agent much pleasure, and the quality of popcorn did not have a large influence on the quantity of popcorn eaten out of habit. Hunger might also generate a desire to eat popcorn, since the agent presumably would have a desire to calm her hunger. But, again, such variable had no significant influence on the results. Thus, as (P3) states, desires and motivations seem to have little influence on habitual action performances. Therefore, if (predominant) desires, or motives, are necessary constituent of intentions and habitual actions can be performed independently of them, then habitual actions can be performed independently of the agent's intentions. That is, intentions are not a necessary requirement for the performance of habitual actions.

The advocate of the Causal Theory might argue, denying (P1), that habitual intentions are independent from the agent's motives. The

problem with this reply is that it requires an important departure from the widespread (and intuitive) conception of intentions as involving (among other components) predominant desires. Such a departure from this conception of intentions should be strongly motivated. However, the availability of a different kind of explanations for habitual actions that does not appeal to a novel kind of intentions would make the postulation of habitual intentions unneeded. A sketch of a possible alternative explanation is provided in the next section.

6. A Non-Causal Explanation for Habitual Actions

An explanation for habitual actions that does not appeal to causation by the agent's psychological states can be provided by appealing to the agent's habits and to the triggering role of the situations to which such habits are associated. In a nutshell, the agent's habits and the associated situations together could cause, if no interruption occurs, the agent's performance of the correspondent habitual actions. Habits are acquired dispositions to perform certain actions in the situations to which they become associated through repetition. For instance, habits such as that of showering in the morning, or that of going to work by bus are developed by performing repeatedly such actions in the correspondent situations, until the agent develops a disposition to perform them and execute them without having to think about them. As we have seen above the situations to which habits are associated play a key role in triggering as well as in

disrupting habitual action performances. In line with this, an explanation for habitual actions different from that which the Causal Theory of Action could provide could be the following:

> If and agent *A* has a habit of *φ*-ing in a situation *S*, then, when in *S*, *A* will *φ* unless something impedes her *φ*-ing. Impediments to *A*'s *φ*-ing can be broadly understood and include *A*'s intention to not *φ*-ing in *S* (or to perform a different action, say to *ψ*) or changes in *S* which disrupt *A*'s habitual *φ*-ing. *A*'s intention not to *φ* (or to *ψ*) in *S* can be both an intention not to *φ* (or to *ψ*) in *S* on a single occasion, or an implementation intention of stop *φ*-ing (or start *ψ*-ing) whenever in *S*. However, in order to avoid the accidental performance of habitual actions – i.e., habitual action slips – the agent will need to pay adequate attention.

Implementation intentions link situations that the agent anticipates to courses of action that she wants to undertake in such situations and are formulated in a way such as "whenever this specific situation arises, I will act in this specific way" (cf. Gollwitzer, 1993, 1996, 1997, 1999). Such intentions appeared effective for automatizing courses of action that the

agent wants to undertake, by helping to form new habits, such as that of doing a workout routine *in the morning*, or to correct bad habits the agent wants to abandon, such as that of drinking coffee *during the afternoon break*.

The following example might help to illustrate the explanation for habitual actions that I provided. If one has the habit of having breakfast right after showering in the morning she will walk to the kitchen and start preparing her breakfast without having to think about it (and likely with her mind busy with different tasks such as organizing her day). Preparing breakfast is what she does by default in the morning after showering; it is the action habitual in that situation. However, if one day she had reasons to act differently, and she planned to do so, likely she would (paying the due attention) succeed. E.g., if she had formed an intention to skip breakfast on a particular day because of a planned blood test in the morning, she would likely succeed in doing so. Similarly, she might not be acting out of habit if something changed in the situation disrupting her habitual performance, such as someone phoning her between the morning shower and the preparation of her breakfast. In such case she would likely pause and think before start preparing her breakfast.

The "non-causal explanation" has important advantages as well as some disadvantages over the explanation that advocates of the Causal Theory could provide for habitual actions. One of the advantages is that it is a more parsimonious explanation for it does not require to postulate any

novel kind of intention, such as habitual intentions. It simply appeals to the agent's habits as dispositions to perform certain actions in certain situations and to the situations triggering the activation of such dispositions. Secondly, it can straightforwardly account for habitual action slips. Habits and the triggering role of the situation, combined with lack of adequate attention by the agent, explain the agent's performance of habitual actions despite her initial intention to act otherwise. And they do so without appealing to conflicting intention and consequent irrationality of the agent. Finally, the non-causal explanation best fits with the empirical results concerning the fundamental role of the situation and the loose connection to the agent's motives in the performance of habitual actions.

An important disadvantage concerns the problem of action individuation. Causation by the agent's psychological states, nowadays intentions, is often regarded as the fundamental criterion for distinguishing actions from mere bodily movements occurring to the agent. But, if habitual actions do not require causation by the agent's psychological states, what is, then, that confers to such actions the status of action? This issue has already been discussed to some extent in the philosophical literature. Solutions proposed appeal to the experience of agency (Chan, 1995), to the agent's guidance over her habitual actions or the possibility to intervene in the course of their performance (Pollard, 2003, 2006; Di Nucci, 2008, 2011, 2013), and to some form of intrinsic intentionality

which is characteristic of habitual actions but not of mere bodily movements (Pollard 2003, 2006). These positions have their benefits and drawbacks; however, providing an assessment of them or proposing a novel solution to the problem falls outside the scope of this chapter.

Another important issue arising concerns the extent to which habitual actions challenge the Causal Theory of Action as general theory of action. That is whether the Causal Theory can be considered a valid theory for all actions except from those that the agent automatizes through the development of habits, or whether it must be rejected as a solution to the problem of action altogether in virtue of the fact that it cannot provide an adequate explanation for *all* actions, which include habitual actions. It might be a point of controversy whether habitual and non-habitual action require different kinds of theory to account for them. This goes in hand with another important question concerning habitual actions. The goal of the Causal Theory of Action was to provide an explanation for intentional actions (or more precisely for actions that are intentional under some description, including unintentional actions). An interesting question that should concern action theorists then is whether habitual actions are a case of intentional actions. Philosophers such as Di Nucci (2008, 2011, 2013) seemed to believe so. On the other hand, Chan (1995) argued that habitual actions pertain to a category of actions that are neither intentional nor unintentional: that of *non-intentional* actions. If it were true that habitual actions belong to a different category of actions, this might justify the

need for a unique explanation for such action which differs from that of the Causal Theory without undermining the validity of the Causal Theory as a theory of non-habitual actions.[25] These issues will be discussed in more detail in the last chapter of the dissertation.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I defended the claim that habitual actions do not require causation by the agent's psychological states – in particular, intentions – and therefore represent a challenge to the Causal Theory of Action. I discussed three arguments in favor of this claim and the possible replies that advocates of the Causal Theory might provide, which I ultimately rejected. The first argument appeals to the phenomenology of habitual actions, which differs significantly from that of "strategic" actions. Advocates of the Causal Theory cannot account for this difference without postulating the existence of a novel kind of intentions, which I called 'habitual intentions.' I argued that such kind of intentions are not required to explain the phenomena that advocates put forward as evidence for their existence and therefore they should not be postulated. The second argument appeals to habitual action slips. Habitual action slips involve

[25] Notably, already before habitual actions gained popularity among philosophers of action, Goldman (1970) in defending a version of the Causal Theory of Action admits that such theory was designed having in mind "strategic" actions and that it is possibly inadequate to account for habitual actions.

the performance of habitual actions despite the agent's intention to act otherwise. To account for them, advocates of the Causal Theory could appeal to inconsistent intentions. However, I argued, appealing to inconsistent intentions implies accepting that agents of habitual action slips are irrational. Habitual action slips are certainly a sign of absent-mindedness, but they are unlikely a sign of irrationality, and for this reason I rejected this reply. The last argument appeals to empirical evidence showing that, as habits develop, the connection between the agent's motives and the habitual actions she performs loosen, while the triggering role of the situation to which such actions are associated becomes fundamental. The intentions that cause agents to act, as traditionally conceived, involves motives. Claiming that habitual intentions do not involve motives would put the advocate of the Causal Theory in a position that is at odds with a widespread and intuitive conception of intentions. If an alternative explanation were available, this move would be unnecessary. I provided, finally, an alternative explanation for habitual actions that does not appeal to causation by the agent's psychological states. Such explanation simply appeals to habits as dispositions to perform certain actions in the situations to which they become associate through repetition and to the triggering role of such situations. This explanation has as important advantages over the Causal Theory explanation as it could be applied to the case of habitual actions. Namely, it is a more parsimonious explanation since it does not require

postulating any novel kind of intentions, it can straightforwardly account for habitual action slips, and it is in line with empirical results on the role of the agents' motives and that of situation in the performance of habitual actions. However, it also brings about important issues concerning the individuation of actions, the intentionality of habitual actions, and the validity of the Causal Theory of Action as a general theory of action. The last chapter will be devoted to a discussion of such issues.

Chapter 3: Habits, Skilled Actions, and the Problem of Subsidiary Actions

1. Introduction

Skilled actions such as dancing, driving, or playing piano involve a large number of actions, the so-called *subsidiary actions*. It has recently been argued that such actions pose a challenge to the Causal Theory of Action (Ruben, 2003; Di Nucci, 2011; Valaris, 2014), according to which events are *actions* in virtue of being appropriately caused by the agent's psychological states. The reason for this is that the Causal Theory would require a too large number of psychological states to account for the causation of all subsidiary actions that skilled actions involve but is seems implausible that the agent really has all of such psychological states. Advocates of the Causal Theory proposed a number of solutions to this problem; however, as we will see, all solutions proposed have important shortcomings.

My aim in this chapter is to show that by focusing on the role that *habits* play in the acquisition of skills and in the exercise of skilled activities, we can provide an explanation for many subsidiary actions which does not appeal to causation by the agent's psychological states, and to do so I will argue that such cases of subsidiary actions are *habitual actions* and, as such, they can be explained by the agent's habits and the role of the

situation to which they are associated without recurring to the agent's psychological states.

I will proceed as follows. Firstly, I will clarify what skilled actions are, particularly emphasizing the distinction between *habitual* and *skilled actions*. Here I will take distance from two tendencies that can be found in the philosophical literature discussing habitual and skilled actions: on the one hand, the tendency to distinguish skilled and habitual actions on the basis of the complexity of their execution (Ryle, 1949; Montero, 2010; Bermúdez 2017), and on the other hand, that of confusing habitual and skilled activities grouping together different kinds of activities that involve a significant degree of automaticity (James, 1890; Ruben, 2003; Pollard, 2003, 2006 a, b, 2010; Clarke, 2010; Valaris, 2014). In line with Douskos (2017), I will take the position that habits and skills are two kinds of *dispositions* which are to be distinguished on the basis of their explanatory role, and that habitual actions and skilled actions are the respective actualizations of such dispositions, although I will not commit to the further distinctions that Douskos (2019) draws between habits and skills.

Secondly, I will discuss the Problem of Subsidiary Actions that skilled actions pose to the Causal Theory of Action and some of the solutions that advocates of the Causal Theory proposed to overcome this problem. Such solutions are, in turn: denying that subsidiary actions are actions at all, claiming that they are actions in virtue of being part of larger actions

(Mele, 1992a, b), and appealing a combination of intentions and motor schemas causing subsidiary actions and guiding their execution (Clarke, 2010). Partially agreeing with the reasons advanced by Ruben (2003) and Valaris (2014), I will argue that the solutions advanced by advocates of the Causal Theory either do not do justice to the agential character of subsidiary actions, or they fail to provide a proper solution to the problem. Furthermore, appealing to motor schemas implies a substantial departure from our conception of the kind of psychological states which cause actions. In virtue of this, to make use of motor schemas in order to account for the intentionality of subsidiary actions, the Causal Theory would need to undergo substantial revisions. But, as I am only concerned here with the problem that subsidiary actions pose to existing versions of the Causal Theory, I will not enter a deeper discussion of this solution.

Finally, I will argue that many subsidiary actions involved in the performance of skilled actions are *habitual actions* and as such – in line with what I argued in Chapter II – they do not necessarily require causation by the agent's psychological states. In doing so, I will partially rely on considerations about some crucial steps of the acquisition of new skills, which Dreyfus's (2004) model of skill acquisition highlights. In particular, Dreyfus's model describes and attributes a great importance to two abilities that agents gradually develop in becoming skilled at certain activities, such as playing piano, swimming, or driving a car: the ability to discriminate among a number of situations that agents face in

exercising a certain skill, and the ability to intuitively execute the actions appropriate in each of such situations.

2. Skilled actions

Two different general tendencies show in the literature of philosophy regarding skills and skilled actions.[26] On the one hand, we find a tendency to focus uniquely on highly complex skills, such as those exhibited by professional athletes (Ryle, 1949; Montero, 2010; Bermúdez, 2017) leaving aside the simpler skills required for instance by most of our daily activities. On the other hand, some philosophers neglect the distinction between habitual and skilled actions altogether and refer to both kind of actions with the same term (James, 1890; Ruben, 2003; Papineau, 2015; Pollard, 2008; Clarke, 2010; Valaris, 2014).

A well-known characterization of skills and skilled actions along the first line is found in Ryle (1949). As we have already seen in the first chapter, Ryle characterizes skills by opposing them to habits, and skilled actions are then contrasted with habitual actions. Skills and habits are both described as dispositions – or "second natures" – but of a quite different

[26] Some of the authors discussed or mentioned in this section use 'skills' or 'habits' to refer to habitual and skilled actions respectively, while Clarke (2010) uses the term 'skilled activities' to refer to all type of actions whose execution requires several actions (or subsidiary actions). In this chapter, I take *skills* and *habits* to be dispositions, while 'habitual action' and 'skilled action' will be employed to refer to those actions respectively involving the actualization of habits and skills.

kind. Habits are single-track dispositions "the actualisations of which are nearly uniform" (Ryle, 1949: 31), and are executed automatically, without having in mind what one is doing. By contrast, skills are multi-track dispositions, the exercise of which can be very heterogeneous and involves vigilance and care. As his choice of examples indicate, daily life activities such as walking, biking, or driving to work are not thought by Ryle as skilled actions, while walking in the dark on a ice-covered surface and perhaps biking up to a mountain against a heavy wind are.

A characterization of the second type is that provided, for instance, by Clarke (2010). In his view all actions consisting of sequences of subsidiary actions – being them routine activities or the performances of professional athletes – are skilled activities; he mentions indeed, among examples of skilled actions, a jazz musician's saxophone playing, a downhill racer's skiing, dressing oneself, walking, and speaking a natural language. Furthermore, he claims of such activities that they all employ *know how* and typically involve a certain degree of improvisation, which suggests that he does not endorse himself Ryle's idea that single- and multi-track dispositions are respectively actualized in simple routine actions, such as walking to the bus stop, and in actions involving more complex skills, such as those performed by professional athletes.

Each of these ways of characterizing skilled actions has important weak points. Ryle's way of opposing skilled to habitual actions implies that only complex activities, such as walking in the dark on an ice-covered

surface, involve skills. However, also many everyday activities that would likely be considered by Ryle habitual actions arguably involve skills. When one learns to drive a car, bike, or typing, one acquires a set of skills. Such skills might not be as impressive as those exhibited by professional athletes, yet they arguably require some practice to be mastered and they need to be acquired in order to perform the correspondent activities. Moreover, whether the just mentioned actions are always executed nearly in the same identical way can be a matter of debate, as for instance even simple actions which Ryle would regard habitual, such as walking, might require some continuous form monitoring and adjusting to the situation one is in, which brings some variability in the way they are performed.

Furthermore, Ryle's view of habitual and skilled actions does not seem to capture an essential characteristic of habitual actions, that is, their repetition by the agent *in certain situations*. Indeed, it is true that when we say that someone is acting out of habit, we usually mean that she is acting without reflecting on what she is doing, but we also mean, usually, that such a person is doing something that she typically does in that situation. In saying, for instance, that someone has a habit of drinking coffee in the morning, driving to office, checking her email as she turns on her laptop, we probably want to emphasize that such a person has the habit of doing something *in the morning*, *in going to office*, and *as she turns on her laptop*.

Clarke, instead, does not account for a distinction between habitual and skilled actions. Many of the examples he mentions are often taken to be examples of habitual actions. For instance, Sam's shaving each workday after eating breakfast (Clarke, 2010: 527):

> Sam, let us suppose, shaves each workday after eating breakfast. The daily shave is part of his morning routine, and his shaving proceeds each day in a highly routine way. Each workday after finishing breakfast, he heads for the bathroom sink. There he washes and rinses his face, dispenses shaving cream onto the fingers of his left hand, spreads the cream on his face—almost always in the same sequence from one part of his face to another—and then begins to shave. He always shaves wielding the razor with his right hand, always following the same general pattern. After every few strokes of the razor, he rinses it under running water, rinsing it again at the end and replacing it on the countertop.

While I agree with Clarke that most of human activities involve skills, of a variable degree of complexity, an account of skills is missing in his paper. Distinguishing habitual and skilled actions is important even though the two are often mixed one with the other. Part of the reason why

Clarke fails to do so is that he does not provide an account of skills. As we will see soon, instead, if we focus on the distinction between *skills* and *habits*, or what it means to have a certain skill or a certain habit, the distinction between habitual and skilled actions can immediately become more evident.

A more helpful distinction between habitual and skilled actions has been proposed by Douskos (2017), which, differently from Ryle's characterization, also makes it possible to account for the involvement of skills in simple everyday life actions. In Douskos's view habits and skills are distinguished on the basis of their *explanatory role*. Habits explain *why* we execute certain actions in certain situations, while skills explain *how* we execute such actions: the technique, method, or way of execution that we employ in order to reach a certain goal.

For example, Julia's habit of driving to work explains why she walks to her car in the morning on every working day. Julia's driving skills, instead, are what makes it possible for her to drive to work: they explain how she drives there.

Accordingly, a certain action, e.g., *driving to work*, can be both habitual and skilled: it is a habitual action because it is an action executed out of habit in the appropriate situation – in Julia's case considered above, every working day in the morning – and it is a skilled action because it involves the exercise of skills – in this case, Julia's driving skills.

Habits and skills have much in common, as they both involve a certain degree of automaticity which allows the agent to exercise them, or a good part of them, without needing to reflect on what she is doing. Yet, they are two different kinds of dispositions, playing different roles in the explanation of actions.

Douskos (2019) drives this distinction even further by claiming that habits and skills involve different kinds of automaticity, that is, that habits involve *impulsivity*, while skills involve *spontaneousness*. His way of distinguishing between impulsivity and spontaneousness reminds to some extent Ryle's distinction between single- and multi-track dispositions.

In brief, impulsiveness invariably elicits a certain response in certain circumstances which allows the agent to act out of habit, without paying attention to what she is doing. Indeed, Douskos claims, "impulsivity dispenses with attention" (Douskos, 2019: 24). By contrast, the spontaneousness of skilled actions despite also involving *automaticity* – which Douskos here means primarily as a way of acting without deliberation – requires the agent's attention, which in Douskos's words consist of a form of goal-sensitivity which allows the agent to determine, for any specific circumstance, which is the suitable way of acting. Indeed, in his view the exercise of skills exhibit variability.

I do not fully agree with Douskos that the involvement of these two different kinds of automaticity is part of what distinguishes habitual from skilled actions. In particular, I don't agree with the claim that variability

in their exercise is an essential component of skills. Indeed, as I will argue in the last section of this chapter, that an important component of being skilled at a certain activity is to be able to execute, for a variety of situations presented, the action that is appropriate to such situations, and in many cases only one kind of action is appropriately fitting, which the agent likely executes always in a very similar way.

However, I will not discuss the distinction between *impulsivity* and *spontaneousness* and whether they are respectively involved in habitual and skilled actions further, as it is not required for the purpose of this chapter. What I instead will take from Douskos, in my usage of the terms "habit" and "skill", is that habits explain *why* we act in a certain way and skills explain *how* we do so. More precisely, I will take *habits* to be dispositions to perform certain actions in certain situations, and *skills* to be dispositions to act according to a certain method, or technique.

3. The Problem of Subsidiary Actions for skilled actions

It has been argued that skilled activities pose a challenge to the Causal Theory of Action because they bring about what is known as Problem of Subsidiary Actions (Ruben, 2003; Valaris, 2014). Part of what possessing a certain skill amounts to is being able to execute an often quite large number of actions which are required by the performance of such a skill. Having driving skills includes, for instance, being able to accelerate,

decelerate, brake, and change gear when it is required to do so. Similarly, being a skillful dancer, for instance, involves many steps, turns, and other movements correctly in the appropriate situation. Such actions involved in skilled activities are known as *subsidiary actions* (Searle, 1983; Adams & Mele, 1989; Mele, 1992a, b; Ruben, 2003; Douskos, 2017; Clarke, 2010; Valaris, 2014).

The problem that skilled activities pose to the Causal Theory is that, because of the many subsidiary actions that they involve, the Causal Theory would require an implausibly large number of psychological states in order to account for all such actions. This is so, because it is central to the Causal Theory of Action that actions are such in virtue of being caused by the agent's psychological states, thus this problem applies to both traditional and more modern versions of the theory, as it is independent on which kind of psychological states are required for the causation of actions.

Ruben (2003: 19) provides his examples having in mind traditional versions of the Causal Theory according to which actions are (non-deviantly) caused by belief-desire pairs:

> In shaving, I make many movements, all of which are my actions. I pull the electric razor vertically down my face, from cheek to chin. I desire to rid myself of my whiskers,

> and if I believed that by pulling the razor in some particular way, I would rid myself of some of my whiskers, that belief and desire would rationalize my so pulling the razor. Or, in dancing, I twist this way and that. I desire to dance, and if I believed that by twisting in some particular way, I would be contributing to my dance, that belief and desire would rationalize the twisting. But of course, I may not have, and typically will not have, any such beliefs.

Valaris (2014: 68), on the other hand, describes the problem in a way that generalizes to different versions of the theory[27]:

> In the standard story, intrinsically mindless bodily movements are turned into actions by distinct mental states that animate them, but, intuitively, there are not enough such mental states around to animate all those of our bodily movements we are inclined to count as intentional actions.

[27] Valaris employs the term "mental states", I used "psychological states" to refer to the same phenomena, and he uses "standard theory" to refer to the Causal Theory of Action.

Advocates of the Causal Theory are since long time aware of such problem, and some of them already presented possible solutions. In the following section I will discuss three of such solutions and their respective shortcomings.

3.1 Subsidiary actions are not mere bodily movements

A first possible solutions is to claim that the subsidiary movements involved in the executions of skilled activities are not actions at all. In line with this, the steps one takes to the kitchen, the typing of single letters in writing my chapter, the driver's slight steering and adjusting of speed are no more than mere *bodily movements*.

However, there was a time in which the above movements involved the agents to think about them, to form intentions before acting. A child that is learning to walk likely needs to concentrate on any single step he or she performs and positioning a foot in front of the other is something that he or she does reflectively; similarly, someone who starts walking again after a serious injury needs to pay attention to his or her steps, being fully conscious of his or her movements, and plan one step after another, until walking becomes a daily activity again and gets at least in great part automatized. Similarly, before learning to type fluently on the keyboard of a laptop, one needs to become familiar with the position of the different keys and the movements involved; however, large part of the adult

populations nowadays can type without needing to search for any single letter on the keyboard. And while, in learning to drive, taking care of the speed and direction of the car can also require reflecting on what one is doing and forming intentions about accelerating, decelerating, and steering right or left, through experience those actions become automatized to the point that that a driver can engage in a conversation with other people in the car, listen to the radio, or even breaking the law and talking on the phone while driving.

This would imply then, according to the Causal Theory of Action, that such movements were once actions, as the agent was learning to execute them, but they then turned to mere bodily movements as agents became more skilled at walking, typing, and driving respectively.[28] This solution has already been rejected by Ruben (2003) and Valaris (2014), and also many advocates of the Causal Theory would plausibly not be happy with the idea that actions cease to be so once the agent acquires new skills.

Ruben rejected this solution on considerations of purposiveness, responsibility, and control. In his view, that subsidiary actions *are actions* can be verified through three simple tests. The first of such tests consist

[28] Although Goldman (1976, Ch. IV) does not engage in depth with the problem subsidiary actions, his discussion of wanting and basic act-types suggests a solution in this direction, as in his view, sequences of actions, such as taking ten steps, can become grouped into a single basic-action. Basic-actions are not composed of actions but involve bodily movements. Therefore, if taking ten steps can be considered, by Goldman, a basic-action, then the single steps involving in it would not be actions but rather mere bodily movements.

in asking the agent if her specific movements are something she meant to do, did on purpose, or intentionally. The second in asking if one could be held responsible for his movements in the eventuality of a law forbidding them. And the aim of the third test is to inquire if such movements are associated with a phenomenology of control and exertion of effort.

So characterized these reasons might not sound particularly strong. An agent might react puzzled to the question "did you bring your razor from cheek to chin on purpose?" (Ruben, 2003: 30), depending on how the question is interpreted. Likely the agent never meant exactly to bring the razor from cheek to chin, and he never meant the opposite. At the moment of executing such a movement the agent might have in mind only the ultimate purpose of his action, i.e., shaving, and never seeing the required movements as purposive themselves. Indeed, an agent who does not give much importance to the sequence of movements involved in shaving might just not know how to reply. However, despite the validity of this test, the agent's movements *are* indeed purposive, being their purpose that of contributing to the process of shaving.

Indeed, a better way of formulating the questions is suggested by Valaris (2014), and this is the Anscombe's question "Why?" (Anscombe, 1957), which asks for the reason why an agent executed a certain movement. The fact that the agent executed such movements *for the purpose of* shaving indicates that such movements are intentional and thus actions, even if the agent might not see the purpose of any of these movements separately.

Whether the test of responsibility could tell us anything about the actional status of these movements is also controversial. It could be intuitive to think – or at least so it is to me – that we can be held justifiably responsible for our actions *because* they are actions, but the possibility to attribute responsibility to the agent does not itself grant to his movements the status of an action. Rather, only after determining whether his movements are indeed *actions*, a decision on the attributability of responsibility can be taken. At best, it could be said here that if we are prone to think that subsidiary actions are a kind of thing for which one can justifiably be held responsible, then it is likely that a shared intuition about them classifying as action is present.

The third test mentioned by Ruben seem to go in a better direction; however, this might not be so because of the *phenomenology* of effort and control. Concerning the effort, many of the subsidiary actions involved in activities such as walking, biking, or driving could be associated with only little effort by the agent. Of course, after walking miles an agent might perceive an effort in making any single step, and after driving many hours even the necessary adjustment to keep the car going at the adequate speed might become tiring. But this typically is not the case for everyday life walking or driving.

Regarding instead control, what probably matters is not the phenomenology of control but the agent *being in control* of his own movements. The phenomenology of control likely results from being

actually in control of one's own movements – and in the case of driving it is better to be the case. However, it could be possible also to have the experience of being in control of one's own actions without effectively controlling them. Mistakes, and perhaps many car accidents, often happen for this reason. Acquiring control is however a characteristic element of becoming skilled at a certain activity. The child who learns to walk learns to control his or her steps, and the dancer who develops his or her skills gradually increases the control over his or her own movements. While reflexes and other kinds of involuntary movements are typically not under our control, subsidiary actions involved in skilled actions are.[29]

Partially related to these latter observations, another reason to think that subsidiary actions *are* actions comes from considerations of *agency*. As I mentioned above, even advocates of the Causal Theory might not be happy with the idea that subsidiary actions are no longer actions once the agent can execute them without thinking, just as part of larger actions. The skilled activities of which subsidiary actions are part can vary in complexity, and so can the subsidiary actions that they involve.

While the steps involved in going to the kitchen are very simple actions, and, if we do not have in mind that children and people who went through motor rehabilitation might struggle executing them, we could after all be

[29] I believe that appealing to control is the right way to account for subsidiary actions (as well as for habitual actions) being *actions*, however, for reasons of space, in this chapter I will not discuss this issue in further detail.

willing to concede that they are not actions, the subsidiary actions involved in the exercise of more complex skills can be themselves very complex.

The skilled activity that a ballet dancer or a gymnast exercise in performing a choreography or a gymnastic routine involve subsidiary actions that require many years of practice in order to be executed safely and within the flow of a choreography or gymnastic routine. Examples of these might be a *Grand Jeté* for a ballet dancer, or a backflip for a gymnast. Once they have memorized and practiced their choreography enough to know it "by heart", when they perform in front of a public of within an audition or competition they simply *do their choreography* and do not pause and think before executing all steps involved, they do not have psychological states causing all of such steps. Because of this, they would be then considered mere bodily movements. Yet, it does not sound plausible to claim that those complex movements that require long time and practice to be mastered, that they involve a loss of agency as the agent becomes skilled in their execution.

3.2 Subsidiary actions are not actions in virtue of being part of larger actions

A second possible solution to the Problem of Subsidiary Actions has been proposed by Mele (1992a, b). In his view, the subsidiary actions involved in the execution of skilled activities do not require to be caused by

psychological states matching their content; rather, they inherit their intentionality by that of the larger action of which they are part. In other words, while the agent clearly intends to perform the larger action – say, swimming 1km – and forms an intention to do so, he or she does not need to form intentions for each of the subsidiary actions required for its execution. The subsidiary actions are intentional because they are part of the larger actions of swimming 1km, and no overpopulation of the agent's mind with psychological states occurs. In Mele's (1992b: 365) own words,[30]

> In the case of an experienced swimmer, at any rate, the individual strokes – subsidiary actions – seem not to be performed for their own individual reasons. Still, many wish to say of each stroke that it is intentional… The various strokes may be intentional in virtue of their particular relation to a 'larger' intentional action (swimming a lap, say) that is done for a reason.

However, the nature of the "particular relation" that subsidiary actions bear to larger actions is not clarified by Mele; rather, all that matters, in

[30] Here Mele, just as Ruben (2003), has in mind a version of the Causal Theory according to which actions are appropriately caused by belief-desire pairs. Belief-desire pairs constitutes reasons for actions, thus acting intentionally *is* acting for reasons.

his view, is that the larger actions encompassing them are done for reasons.

Mele's solution has been strongly criticized by Ruben (2003) and Valaris (2014) for similar reasons. As they both notice, not all parts of a large action such as swimming a lap are themselves actions. While the swimmer's strokes are subsidiary actions, other movements, such as his involuntary movements of the lips or of the eyebrows, or the increasing of his or her heartrate due to the effort of swimming. Mele's solution cannot account for the distinction between subsidiary actions and mere bodily movements or reactions, as it can be said of both that they are caused by the agent's intention of performing the larger actions of which they are part (Ruben, 2003; Valaris, 2014), in this case that of swimming a lap. Thus, as Ruben (2003) argues, if advocates of the Causal Theory wanted to account for subsidiary actions being actions, they would need to find psychological states that cause exactly those subsidiary actions, and as those causing the larger action, e.g., of swimming a lap do not do the work, then they would need to appeal to more specific psychological states that rationalized all subsidiary actions involved in, e.g., swimming a lap. The problem would not be solved then, because they would still need a too large number of psychological states to account for subsidiary actions.

I find the argument put forward by Ruben (2003) and Valais (2014) compelling enough to discard the solution that Mele (1992) proposes to the Problem of Subsidiary Actions.

However, Ruben's alternative to the Causal Theory of Action only consists of taking actions to be "ontologically fundamental items" (2003: 84). This solution does not strike as particularly appealing, but as a discussion of this proposal is not of particular relevance for this chapter, I will not discuss it here. A critique to this solution can be found instead in Clarke (2010).

Valaris's (2014) own solution to the Problem of Subsidiary Actions also seems to imply that subsidiary actions are actions because they are part of larger actions, but it provides a clearer account of the relation between subsidiary actions and those actions of which they are part. In doing so, he takes distance from the idea intrinsic in the Causal Theory that actions are caused by psychological states that are constitutively independent from the actions themselves. In his view, the right way to explain the relation between an action, φ and a subsidiary action ψ involved in its execution is to focus of the instrumental relation existing between φ and ψ, thus by focusing on the fact that φ-ing is done in the purpose of ψ-ing. Accordingly, the swimmer's strokes are actions because they are done for the purpose of swimming a lap.

With respect to Valaris's conception of purposiveness of the subsidiary actions, he describes subsidiary actions as manifestations of practical

knowledge, *knowing how*, and he refers to them as "practical grasps of ways of acting," which involve dispositions to act in a relevant way. That is, in his view, the swimmer's strokes are manifestation of his practical knowledge of how to swim, practical ways of grasp of how to swim.

While Valaris's solution does not tell us enough on how subsidiary actions are brought about, the author makes two important suggestions. Firstly, that subsidiary actions are manifestations of *knowing how*, which captures the agent's ability to execute them is part of what makes her skilled at a certain activity, and, secondly, that they involve dispositions to act in a relevant way. Nevertheless, Valaris does not provide more detailed information on the kind of dispositions he had in mind. These suggestions will be discussed partially be discussed in the last section of this chapter, where I will argue that many subsidiary actions can eb considered cases of habitual actions.

3.3 Motor schemas, subsidiary actions, and the Causal theory of Action

Finally, another solution to accommodate subsidiary actions within the framework of the Causal theory of Action has been proposed by Clarke (2010). In a nutshell, Clarke argues that the intention to execute a certain action guides its execution one step after another through the activation of *motor schemas*.

The notion of motor schemas comes from cognitive psychology and refers to the elementary units of internal models or motor representations which can be organized hierarchically and are implicated in the execution of actions (Jeannerod, 1997). According to Jeannerod's characterization of them, motor schemas are assembled in multileveled representation which guide our actions, and such assembly can occur both automatically, e.g., in the case of well-learned routine actions, or requiring deliberation (1997: 127). Clarke makes use of this notion in arguing for the view that intentions activate motor schemas and cause this way the appropriate subsidiary actions in the appropriate order, which is, in his view, part of the agent's exercising the required skill (2010: 538).

Clarke illustrates his position by providing examples of an agent's, Sam, shaving in the morning and that of another agent, Sue, improvising a dance to the Grateful Dead. Sam's shaving is, according to Clarke, caused by a (present-directed)[31] intention whose content – as in accordance with Bratman's (1987)'s characterization of *intention* – is a plan. This plan includes, for instance, "dispensing the shaving cream, repeatedly pulling the razor along the surface of his face, rinsing the razor every few strokes,

[31] In this case Clarke uses the term "present-directed intention" because he describes a routine action of Sam that, in his view, comes from Sam's policy of shaving every morning, a type of future-directed intention, which evolves, as the time of shaving comes, in a present-directed intention of shaving *now*. For a deeper discussion about the nature of future- and present-directed intentions see Bratman (1987).

and so forth" (Clarke, 2010: 527), all involving a series of movements guided by motor representations.

Sue's improvised dancing likely involves less pre-planning and a higher degree of improvisation and spontaneity. But as in the case of Sam's shaving, the initiation of Sue's movements can be traced back to a present-directed intention, her intention to dance as the music starts, which activates an appropriate sequence of motor representations makes her movements intentional and thus actions. Such movements, he claims, are part of a repertoire of dance movements built of over the years, for instance by playing with a hula hoop, imitating her older sister, or trying do dance to them music alone, and their various components reside in her central nervous system.

Valaris (2014) advanced a critique to Clarke's view which brings some parallelism to that which he posed to the Mele's (1992a, b) solution discussed above. Again, Valaris argues, intentions can cause different sorts of bodily reactions, such as an increase of the agent's heart rate in performing a certain physical activity or an increased salivation in coming to intend to go to the kitchen and get some chocolate. What should help us to distinguish between those reactions and the subsidiary actions involved in performing the intended activities is that only the latter are caused by motor schemas. It is not clear, however, why such reactions could not be also caused motor schemas. As Valaris argues, indeed, heart rate and salivation are regulated by internal control systems, and no

criterion is provided which tells us why these regulatory systems do not count as motor schemas, especially as motor schemas are characterized as non-accessible to the agent.

Further research or better knowledge of the empirical data might help us clarify in which respect motor schemas differ from internal control system such as that regulating our heart rate. However, it is worth considering whether appealing to motor schemas really might help advocates of the Causal Theory to defend their own theory, rather than to develop a new one. Clarke (2010: 529) was already aware of the problem, as he mentions himself that motor schemas do not figure in our ordinary articulation of the content of intention. However, he also believes that a substantial revision of the folk understanding of intention in order to accommodate motor schemas would be warranted.

Although it is part of the goal of this chapter to discuss the problem that subsidiary actions pose to the Causal Theory of Action, I am not concerned here with the question of whether a theory of action that involves a relevant departure from our understanding of intentions – or any other kinds of psychological states that have been thought to cause actions – can provide an adequate account for subsidiary actions. because of this, I will not discuss this issue further. Rather, I will propose in the next section an explanation for at least many subsidiary actions, which relies partially the explanation for habitual action that I proposed in Chapter II and partially on the general process of skill acquisition.

4. Subsidiary actions, skills acquisition, and habitual actions

My goal in this section is to argue that at least many subsidiary actions are *habitual actions* and as such they do not require causation by the agent's psychological states.[32] The reasons motivating this thesis have to do with considerations regarding, on the one hand, important characteristics of habitual actions and, on the other hand, the process through which skills are typically acquired.

Let us remind some paradigmatic cases of habitual actions. Turning on the light when entering a dark room, picking up our phone when it rings, or typing in the password as we turn on our laptop are all examples of habitual actions. What they have in common is that they are normally executed without reflecting on what we are doing, "out of habit", in the specific situations to which they are associated.

In Chapter II, I proposed an explanation for habitual actions which does not appeal to causation by the agent's psychological states, but only to the role of the agent's *habits* as acquired dispositions to perform certain actions in the situation to which they become associated through repetition and to the role of the *situation* which triggers the exercise of such habits.

[32] As I will discuss further at the end of this section, my goal here is not to argue that all cases of subsidiary actions are habitual actions. Some cases of subsidiary actions can be executed spontaneously and not being part of the agent's repertoire of habitual actions. Yet, as I hope to show, many subsidiary actions *are* habitual actions.

According to this explanation, if an agent *A* has a habit of *φ*-ing in a situation *S*, then, when in *S*, *A* will normally *φ*, unless her habitual *φ*-ing his disrupted. Disruptions to *A*'s habitual *φ*-ing can be broadly understood and include intentions (including implementation intentions)[33] not to *φ* in *S* and changes in *S* which prevents the agent from acting out of habit. Furthermore, as I noted in Chapter II, if the agent decided to act against his or her habit, he or she might have to pay closer attention to what he or she is doing, as habits are strong enough guides of our actions to cause us performing habitual action slips, that is: acting as of habit despite intending to act otherwise.

For example, in line with my explanation for habitual actions, if Sam has the habit of shaving in the morning, then each morning, if no unexpected event occurs and if he does not take the decision to act otherwise, he will enter the bathroom and start shaving. Or if Anna has the habit of checking her email as she turns on her laptop, when she arrives home and turn on her laptop, she will normally click on the browser icon and open her email account, unless she decides to do something else, or unless something unusual captures her attention, prevents her default action, or pushes her to perform a different kind of action. Before proceeding to see how this explanation can help us to solve the problem of subsidiary actions for

[33] To remind, implementation intentions are intentions to perform a certain action whenever a certain situation occurs. In this case, such intentions would be intentions of *not* performing a certain habitual action any longer in the associated situation, or intentions to undertake a different course of action whenever such a situation is presented.

skilled actions it may be useful to look at how skills likely tend to be acquired.

4.1 Three phases of skill acquisition

Dreyfus (2004) describes a model of skill acquisition in adults which highlights important steps in the process of acquiring a new skill, and although I am not defending here this model, nor am I claiming that it is a completely accurate model, his model can be used as basis to discuss important features of the skill acquisition process.

Dreyfus' model is structured in five different stages, which I will group here in three different phases of skill acquisition. The first phase, which I call here "the *beginner phase*," can group together the *Novice* and *Advanced Beginner* stages of Dreyfus's (2004) model. In this phase, the learner memorizes a set of features to take into account in the exercise of the desired skills and a list of rules to determine the right actions to execute on the basis of such features. As a beginner starts, he or she tries to put in practice what just learned theoretically. Later, he or she develops a basic practical knowledge of how to act in specific situations and starts noticing additional aspects of the situation and to develop a better understanding of the behavior required and of how to adjust his or her behavior.

The beginner driver, in Dreyfus's (2004) example, uses, e.g., engine sounds and the speed indicated by the speedometer to decide when it is time to change gear, and then tries to act accordingly. His or her way of acting at this stage is likely not very efficient and does not fulfill the requirements of a smooth driving. Similarly, a beginner salsa dancer whose teacher recently explained the basic steps and the basic principles of moving to salsa music might be very concentrated in finding the beat and typically struggles executing the steps, coordinating with his or her partner and remaining on beat, so that he or she cannot at this stage just enjoy in a playful dance with his or her partner, style up his or her moves, or express his or her musicality. Through some practice and experience the beginner driver and the beginner salsa dancer will hopefully enter the second phase of their learning process.

In the *intermediate phase*, the learner begins to abandon the detached rule-following stance of the beginner and his or her actions start to be guided by an increased sensitivity to different features of the situation and by the feelings that he or she receives when acting in one way or another, including the feeling of acting correctly or incorrectly.

The intermediate level driver starts acting mostly accordingly with the perceived speed of the car rather than with the speed indicated by the speedometer, and the intermediate level dancer starts recognizing frequent kinds of variation in the music and to adapt his or her dance to them and to the unique characteristics of his or her partner, including size,

moving skills, and body tension. Both learners begin to intuitively understand further rules which should guide their actions and to apply them without having to think about it. Yet, both need to go often though decisional processes to determine the right action to execute, are prone to mistakes, are easily challenged and can safely and confidently deal only with a low level of difficulty.

Finally, when reaching the *proficiency phase,* the learner is highly capable of discriminating among different situations and to intuitively undertake the course of actions appropriate to each of them. In Dreyfus's view, as the proficiency of the learner increases, his or her experience is translated into an embodied and atheoretical knowledge.

For instance, the expert driver feels when it is time to adjust his speed and his or her foot "simply lifts off the accelerator and applies the appropriate pressure to the brake" (Dreyfus, 2004: 180). "Simply" here indicates that such actions are performed intuitively, automatically. Indeed, he claims that experts normally just do "what normally works and, of course, it normally works" (2004: 180). Similarly, the expert dancer is guided by the music, does not need to pay attention to find the beat or individuate variations in the music, and mostly does not struggle to connect with his or her dance partner. While an advanced salsa leader might time from time to time to which move or figure he wants to execute, the inspiration often comes from listening to the music and he no longer needs to think about how to execute moves. Similarly, a salsa follower is able to follow

a wide variety of moves, including moves she did not follow before, without having to ask herself what to do. This also leaves both the leader and the follower the possibility to focus on other aspects of the dance, such as styling up their dance, or engaging in a playful behavior toward each other.

As the case of the advanced salsa dancer illustrates, it is not entailed by this description of skill acquisition that being skilled at a certain activity implies acting at every time automatically, unreflectively. Nor is it implied that the highly skilled agent does not have a detailed theoretical knowledge of the activities at which she is skilled – it is likely that highly skilled agents do have such knowledge. The relevant point is that a good part of her knowledge of how to act in a number of different situations – constituting the "basics" of a skill like driving or dancing – is to an important extent internalized, embodied, in a way such that, in most cases, the experienced skilled agent executes the appropriate action without previously reflecting on what to do. This model of skill acquisition can now help us to see why many subsidiary actions are habitual actions.

4.2 Subsidiary actions that are habitual actions

In learning through practice and experience to discriminate between different kinds of situations and to intuitively execute the action that is appropriate to each of them, agents acquire certain dispositions. Such dispositions are *habits*, that is, dispositions to perform certain actions in the situation to which they become associated though repetition.

Triggered by the specific situations that the skilled agent over time associated with them, such habits cause several of the actions that the agent executes in the course of skilled activities, at least many of the typical cases of subsidiary actions.

These likely include likely many subsidiary actions mentioned in this chapter, such as a driver's automatic changing of the gear when the perceived speed of the car calls for it, a swimmer's strokes in swimming a lap, where the execution of each stroke is executed by the completion of its preceding, a dancer's automatically stepping on beat, and a gymnast's execution of a particular movement, part of a pre-learned choreography, when the right moment to do such movement comes.

Such actions are then *habitual actions*, actions performed out of habit in the situations to which they become associated through repetition – just as turning on the light when entering a dark room, picking up the phone when it rings, or typing in the password when turning on our laptop are.

The relevance of showing that such cases of subsidiary actions are habitual actions is that, as it has been argued by Pollard (2003; 2006a, 2006b, 2010), Di Nucci (2008, 2011, 2013), Douskos (2017) and myself (Chapter II), habitual actions do not require causation by the agent's psychological states.

This provides for us a way to account for subsidiary actions to be *actions*, as habitual actions are,[34] and yet to circumvent the problem of assigning to the agent an implausible number of psychological states. Furthermore, (at least many) subsidiary actions could then be explained in a way that fits with fundamental ideas of what is at least part of acquiring a skill (Dreyfus, 2004): as the agent becomes skilled at a certain activity, some actions that once required him or her to focus and think about how to act become then habitual actions, and the agent learns to execute them automatically in the situation to which she associate them through experience.[35]

An objection to the claim that the subsidiary actions involved in skilled activities are in many cases habitual actions might come from those who conceive skills as disposition whose one of the fundamental characteristics is the *heterogeneity* in their way of being exercised (e.g.,

[34] More on this will be found in Chapter IV.

[35] Although not relevant here, the fact that my explanation for habitual actions (Felletti, under review) also applies to many cases of subsidiary actions may be a point in favor of this explanation, as it could explain a relevantly higher number of actions which are all problematic for the Causal Theory of Action.

Ryle, 1949; Douskos, 2019), that the capacity to improvise is an essential part of being skilled at a certain activity.

Against this possible objection it can be said that I did not claim here that all actions involved in the exercises of a skill are habitual actions, nor did I claim that all subsidiary actions are. There can be, and likely there are, cases of subsidiary actions which are independent on the agent's having developed habits to execute them. Many subsidiary actions which still are instrumental to reach a certain goal can be performed by chance and never have been performed before for the same purpose, yet they might be performed without requiring the agent to reflect. Moreover, skills obviously allow for flexibility and creativity, not all that is done in exercising a skill is done automatically, yet subsidiary actions typically are. What is important, for the purpose of this chapter, is not that *all* subsidiary actions that are executed in the exercise of a certain skill are habitual actions, but that *some* of them are, and in virtue of this they are actions and can be explained by appealing to the role of the situation to which the agent associates them and to the habits that the agent formed in such situation, without thus making any reference to the agent's psychological states.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued discuss an important problem that skilled activities pose to the Causal Theory of Action: in accounting for such actions, the Causal Theory would require the agent to have an implausible number of psychological states to account for all subsidiary actions involved in the performance of skilled activities, such as driving a car, swimming, or dancing. I discussed and the main solutions that advocates of the Causal Theory proposed to the problem: that subsidiary actions are mere bodily movements, that they are intentional actions in virtue of being part of larger actions, and that they are so in virtue of being caused by motor schemas. Such solutions have been discarded on the ground of the important shortcoming that each of them shows, and I proposed instead an explanation for at least many cases of subsidiary actions which does not appeal to causation by the agent's psychological states. According to this explanation, many subsidiary actions involved in the exercise of skills are habitual actions, and as such they can be explained by the agent's habits and by the situation to which those habits are associated, which together trigger the agent's performance of the correspondent habitual actions – in this case, subsidiary actions executed within the course of skilled activities.

Chapter 4: Habitual Actions and The Problem of Action

1. Introduction

The most important question that philosophers of action try to address is that which Frankfurt (1978) named 'The problem of Action.'

As Frankfurt (1978: 157) characterizes it, the problem of Action is 'to explicate the contrast between what an agent does and what merely happens to him, or between the bodily movements that he makes and those that occur without him making them.'

Indeed, what ultimately makes actions so special, among all kinds of human behaviors, is that actions are things humans *do*. That we do them – a claim on which we can intuitively agree – brings about important implications concerning, for instance, our responsibility over the immediate foreseeable consequences of such actions, or our status as authors, *agents*, of such actions. But what it means "to do" something is not as intuitive and among philosophers it is yet a matter of controversy.

The Causal Theory of Action provided a solution to the Problem of Action: what distinguishes actions from merely bodily movements is that only the formers are intentional (under a certain description)[36], and they are so in virtue of being appropriately, or *non-deviantly*,[37] caused by the

[36] See Davidson (1971). For further discussion of this concept see also Ansecombe (1979).
[37] For a discussion of deviant causation see, e.g., Davidson (1980: 78-79).

agent's psychological states – typically desires, beliefs, and intentions. This theory has been widely accepted and for long time it could perhaps be considered the predominant view in the philosophy of action. However, as it has recently been argued by a number of philosophers (e.g., Ruben 2003; Pollard 2003, 2006; Di Nucci 2008, 2011, 2013, Douskos, 2017) and defended in the previous chapters, habitual actions pose a challenge to this view because they do not require causation by the agent's psychological states.

This raises important questions, of which the most important is: if habitual actions are not (necessarily) caused by the agent's psychological states, what makes them *actions* at all? Furthermore, if being caused by the agent's psychological state is necessary for an action to be *intentional*, and if it is true that habitual actions are *not* necessarily caused by the agent's psychological states, what can we say about the intentionality of habitual actions? And, finally, which are the implication that this brings about for the Causal Theory of Action?

In this chapter I aim to provide an answer to such questions, or at least to move a step forward in reaching such an answer. After providing an overview of the problem and the possibilities available to deal with it, I will discuss some of the proposals that have been made in order to account for the status of habitual actions as *actions* and the different views to which these proposals are bound with respect to the intentionality of habitual actions. Two main different views will emerge: one according to

which habitual actions are *intentional actions* guided or controlled by the agent, and according to which habitual actions are *non-intentional* actions associated with a particular *phenomenology of* agency. Finally, I will show that the two views are in large part compatible one with the other, and I will try to bring together the advantages of each of them, sketching my own proposal, according to which habitual actions are non-intentional controlled actions. This proposal provides a way of accounting for the agency and reduced intentionality of habitual actions while also leaving space for the Causal Theory as a theory of intentional action.

2. Back to the Problem of Action

Joining the recent trend in the philosophy of action, I had argued in Chapter II that habitual actions do not require causation by the agent's psychological states; that is, in favor of the thesis that psychological states are not *necessary* for the causation of habitual actions – a weaker thesis than that according to which the concept of habitual action is incompatible with "the very idea of intention" (see Douskos, 2017).

As we have seen, this brings about an important challenge for the Causal Theory of Action, which applies both to formulations of this theory according to which actions are caused by belief-desire pairs, as well as to more recent formulations according to which actions are caused by intentions.

However, once we deny that habitual actions are caused by mental states, we are left with important open questions about (i) the status of habitual actions as actions, (ii) the intentionality of habitual actions (or lack thereof), and (iii) the validity of the Causal Theory of Action as a (general) theory of action.

Concerning the first two of the just mentioned issues, there are three possibilities that I can think of. Firstly, to deny that habitual "actions" are actions at all, and to argue instead that they are mere bodily movements. Secondly, to argue that habitual actions are still actions, but to deny that they are intentional. This is the possibility embraced by Chan (1995), who argued that habitual actions belong to a specific separate category of actions, that of *non-intentional* actions. Finally, to argue that habitual actions are fully-fledged intentionally actions, despite not being necessarily caused by the agent's psychological states, a proposal made, for instance, by Pollard (2003, 2006) and Di Nucci (2008, 2011).

There are several considerations in light of which habitual actions do not shine as mere bodily movements occurring to a person – in Frankfurt's (1978: 157) words – "without his making them." Some of them have already been discussed, in the previous chapter, in the context of subsidiary actions. We have seen, for instance, that some habitual actions might involve complex movements requiring a high level of control on the side of the agent. Habitual actions performed in the course of a stretching or warm up routine of a ballet dancer or a gymnast might be

quite challenging for the averagely fit man or woman. Yet, the professional dancer or gymnast is able to them one after the other with minimal effort and without needing to actively focus on what he or she is doing, while being able to execute other activities such as chatting with other athletes, reflecting on his or her training goals or concentrating on his or her unrelated thoughts.

Moreover, making such actions habitual and effortless requires, in addition to mere repetition, that the agent trains them, which is something that reflexes and other kinds of bodily movements that might seem related to habitual actions do not require,[38] and could also speak in favor of the claim that habitual actions are not merely bodily movements. In addition to this, it also suggests that we have a level of control and responsibility over habitual actions that we do not have over mere bodily movements:

[38] One could argue here that reflexes can be trained and bring as an example the case of Pavlovian conditioning (Pavlov, 1902, 1927). In Pavlov's study, a dog could be "trained" to saliva whenever a stimulus that the dog associated with food – such as the steps of the laboratory assistant – was presented. Salivation is a typical example of reflex. Yet, one could reply here that was is trained is not salivation itself, but an association between certain stimuli and food, which itself causes the dogs to salivate.

There could be though other types of borderline cases between reflexes and habitual actions, such as that of a soldier being trained to immediately shoot to an adversary soldier in a perceived situation of threat or danger (assuming here that it is really the case that soldiers are trained to such a reaction). One way to reply to this objection is to argue that the soldier's reaction, that we might call "reflex" is instead a habitual action. indeed, it fulfills the typical criteria for being categorized as a habitual action: it does not require conscious deliberation or decision-making, and it involves the agent acting as according to a disposition that he or she acquired (through training and repetition) to perform a certain action in a certain situation to which it becomes associated. The activation of such a disposition in the triggering situation is what causes the soldier's shooting.

we are responsible for those habits that we acquire by repeating certain actions, in certain contexts, as well as we are responsible and in control of untraining our bad habits or training better habits in their place. As the acquisition of reflexes mostly happens outside our control, and reflexes are often innate, we cannot be held responsible in the same way for our reflexes.

Another reason to see habitual actions as *actions* is that it seems odd to claim that, once actions become habitual, they cease to be actions and turn to mere bodily movements. That would imply, indeed, that even though we become better at performing certain actions, and we increase the level of control over our performance of such actions, we are no longer agents of those "actions", but they rather "happen to us." The idea of something "just happening to us" seems to be in conflict with our intuitions about paradigmatic examples of habitual actions, such as those performed in driving to work, or in preparing breakfast in the morning. We typically have no control on what "happens to us," except from that control that sometimes we can exercise to prevent something from happening, and that allows us for instance to avoid getting wet under the rain by taking care of bringing an umbrella when the forecasts predict a heavy rain. But we *do* seem to have control on actions such as changing gear, braking, accelerating, turning left or right, even though we drive the same path every weekday in the morning. And we would probably be reluctant to sit in the car of someone who claims that such actions just happen to him or

her, that he or she is just on a sort of "autopilot" until she reaches his or her office.

Finally, as there seem to be enough reasons to think of habitual actions as *actions*, we might wonder why we should not do so. And defending the thesis that habitual actions are *not* actions at all would require the endorser of such thesis to provide solid arguments in favor of his or her thesis. If such an argument had to rely on the fact that habitual actions are not caused by intentions as usually thought of – psychological states emerging from a decisional process and involving a commitment to a certain course of action – then the thesis that habitual "actions" are not actions would have the big downside that no movement that is not caused by an intention is an action. This might make his or her theory of action too restrictive, as it would imply that most "actions" performed in our daily life – including spontaneous "actions", habitual "actions", subsidiary "actions" and mannerisms (Chan, 1995) or sub-intentional "actions" Steward (2009) – are after all something different than *actions*.

The issue of the intentionality of habitual actions and its consequences for the Causal Theory of Action will be discussed in the next sections. However, some of the consequences that the status of actions as *actions* and the *intentionality* of habitual actions have for the Causal Theory can be seen in advance.

If habitual "actions" are not taken to be *actions*, the Causal Theory of Actions, as a general theory of action, faces the only issue, mentioned

above, of providing a reasonable explanation for why habitual "actions" are after all *not* actions – this, of course, unless separate reasons emerge to question this theory.

Depending on whether habitual actions are considered intentional or, following Chan's (1995) terminology "non-intentional", the Causal Theory would encounter different challenges. If habitual actions would turn out being *intentional* actions, the Causal Theory would likely face the most substantial challenge, as it is a theory about intentional actions, where actions are intentional in virtue of being caused by the agent's psychological states. If the intentionality of action – in this case of habitual actions – can be granted otherwise, it is not clear why the Causal Theory would still be needed. If being caused by the agent's psychological states is not required for an action to be intentional, because actions can be intentional for separate reasons, then we have two options.

One is, actions can be intentional *either* because they are caused by the appropriate psychological states of the agent *or* for some other reason – such as being guided (Di Nucci, 2011) or exhibiting some form of intrinsic intentionality (Pollard, 2006). In this case, the Causal Theory would then by a theory of *some* but not all actions, and in particular of those actions whose intentionality stems from being caused by the agent's psychological states.

The second option would be to claim that all actions – including habitual actions – are intentional, but what makes them intentional is *not* being

caused by the agent's psychological states, but separate reasons. This option would involve a rejection of the Causal Theory, as the core claim of such a theory is that actions are intentional in virtue of being caused by the agent's appropriate psychological states.

If habitual actions are taken instead to be *non-intentional actions*, then the biggest conflict with the Causal theory would be on the causalist's claim that some activities are *actions* because they are *intentional* (under a certain description), indeed, habitual actions would be a counterexample to such claim as they would be a case of *actions* that are *not* intentional (under any description)[39]. However, there would be no conflict with the causalist's claim that actions are *intentional* in virtue of being caused by the agent's psychological states. Indeed, habitual actions, which do not require to be caused that way, would just not count as intentional. In this case, The Causal Theory would be preserved as a theory of *intentional action* (rather than as a general theory of action).

In what follows I will discuss two different views on action: a group of views that rely on a notion of control or guidance (Frankfurt, 1978; Di Nucci, 2008, 2011, 2013) according to which all actions – including habitual actions – are *intentional* (under some description), and Chan's (1995) view according to which habitual actions are *non-intentional* actions. I will then try to show that, by making the appropriate

[39] See Chapter II for a discussion of the possibility that habitual actions (slips) are intentional under some description.

adjustments, the advantages of these two views can be brought together. In doing so, I will propose that habitual actions are non-intentional controlled actions.

3. The Guidance Theory of Action from Frankfurt to Di Nucci

Partially relying on the previous work on Frankfurt (1978) and Pollard (2003, 2006a, 2006b), Di Nucci (2008, 2011, 2013) proposed what we might call "The Guidance Theory of Action", as an attempt to sketch a suitable alternative to the Causal Theory that can account for the intentionality of automatic actions – including habitual actions[40] – without relying on the causation by preceding psychological states.[41] Di Nucci's view is likely the main alternative to Chan's (1995) proposal that habitual actions are *non-intentional actions*, which will be discussed in the next section. Before discussing Di Nucci's view, however, I will discuss its antecedents, Frankfurt's (1978) theory of Guidance and Pollard's theory

[40] Automatic actions, as discussed by Di Nucci (2011), include more than just habitual actions. Roughly speaking, "automatic action" is often used as an umbrella term to refer to all actions that exhibit typical traits of automaticity, including a reduced need for attention and for conscious control, a low level of awareness, a decrease effort in their execution over time, and – most important – no need for preceding decisional processes (see, e.g., Bargh 1994, 1996, 19999, 2006, 2008; Moors and De Houwer, 2006). In Di Nucci's work, the term "automatic action" is mostly used to refer to habitual actions and skilled activities.

[41] Notably, Frankfurt (1978) admitted the existence of actions that are neither intentional nor unintentional, which he names "intentional movements." Di Nucci (2008) denies the distinction between intentional movements and intentional actions.

of habitual actions (2003, 2006a), and emphasize the differences between these views and that of Di Nucci.

Frankfurt (1978) developed his theory of action out of a dissatisfaction with the Causal Theory, which, in his view, failed to account for a real distinction between those activities that agents *do*, i.e., actions, and those movements that merely occur to them. Indeed, he argued, the claim that the only difference between actions and mere bodily movements is in the way they are caused implies that the movements themselves do not different in any relevant aspect. However, in his view this was not the case, and to overcome the problem he proposed his own view of action that would allow us to distinguish between actions and other kinds of activities by looking at the movements executed and the way the agent carries them on.

He argued, indeed, that what distinguishes actions from mere bodily movements is that only the formers are under the agent's *guidance*, which means that they are subject to adjustments operated by the agent – rather than, e.g., by some physiological mechanisms or by external forces – which compensate (or are aimed to) for the effect of potential interferences occurring in the course of the movement that conflicts with the agent's goal.

Notably, in Frankfurt's view it is not required that the agent *does* make such adjustments, but rather it is sufficient that he or she would be capable to make them in case they were required.

Nevertheless, in Frankfurt's view an agent's guidance over his or her own movements does not suffice by itself to make them *intentional actions*, because intentional actions still require to be caused by intentions. Movements guided by the agent that are not caused by the appropriate psychological states of the agent are called by Frankfurt "intentional movements."

Frankfurt's Guidance View aims to be a general alternative to the Causal Theory of Action. In the context of habitual actions, instead, Pollard (2003, 2006b) advanced a proposal according to which habitual action involve a notion of control which is in some respects similar to Frankfurt's notion of guidance. He argued that there are two characteristics of habitual actions might "support the common-sense intuition that the exercises of habits are manifestation of agency" (Pollard, 2006b: 60) and that jointly *could* grant habitual actions the status of *actions*.[42][43] And, as we will see afterward, he argues that habitual actions are *intentional actions*.

The first is a certain intimate connection that habits seem to have to agency. He claims that "having a certain habit is part of what it is to be a particular agent" (Pollard, 2006b: 60). Such an intimate connection to agency arises, in Pollard's view, with the process that leads to the

[42] In Pollard's view, those two considerations also make the agent fully responsible for his or her habits and the habitual actions he or she performs. I will not discuss this point here.

[43] Importantly, Pollard maintains that only *intentional actions*, actions intentional under some description, are actions. more on this will come later.

acquisition of a certain habit, which he sees as analogous to that of acquiring a certain skill or competence from scratch.

Pollard's own words provide a good illustration of his idea. He claims that for a certain action, φ-ing, performed in in certain circumstances to become a habit it is not sufficient that the agent repeats that same action in the same circumstances, but he or she must be able to do so "automatically", without thinking, to the point that it is more difficult for such an agent to do *not* to perform that action in the associated circumstances. When this happens, in Pollard's view, the agent has made the habit his or her own. His suggestion (Pollard, 2006b: 61) is then that:

> we would be leaving something out of a description of what it was to be that agent were we to omit her habit of φ-ing. Φ-ing is not only second nature, but it is part of her nature. Exercising the habit of who she is. The same thing could not have been said before the habit was properly acquired.

This consideration, however, does not suffice to make habitual actions *actions*. A plausible reason for this is that the intimate connection that habits seem to have with agency concerns indeed the agent's *habits* rather than the very actions performed out of habit. By thinking about the reason

that motivates Frankfurt's dissatisfaction with the Causal theory of Action, we can see that Pollard would incur in a similar problem, were he to claim that the connection between habits and agency alone suffices to make habitual actions *actions*. Indeed, even assuming that an agent's habits really tell us something relevant about the agent's nature, nothing about the *execution* of habitual actions itself would provide us with good reasons to consider them *actions* – especially once we take into account that, as Pollard points out, habitual actions are executed "automatically", without having to mind what one is doing, just like other movements that are *not* actions.

Indeed, Pollard (2006b) also discusses the contrast between habitual actions and other phenomena that might resemble in some respects habitual actions but they are *not* actions: reflexes and movements caused by addictions, compulsions, and phobias. The most substantial difference between such behaviors and habitual actions relies in the special kind of control that, in Pollard's view, we have over habitual actions, which he names "intervention control."

Intervention control is the second consideration because of which, according to Pollard, habitual actions are *actions*. Intervention control, as Pollard characterizes it, is the capability of the agent to directly intervene on the performance of his or her own actions: the agent is at any point

able to intervene before or during the performance of a habitual action and chose to do something else or to do nothing at all.[44]

Habitual action slips, discussed in Chapter II, might at first look like a counterexample to the idea that we have *intervention control* over habitual actions. This, because in the case of habitual action slips the agent performs a habitual action despite intending to do otherwise (such as leaving the bus in front of our workplace while intending to go elsewhere). However, those cases do not indicate that the agent has no control over his or her habitual action performances, but rather that a certain level of attention might be needed to act against our habits.

Intervention control by itself is also not sufficient to grant habitual "actions" the status of actions, it is possible for an agent to intervene on an activity that is *not* his or her own action, such as that performed by a machine or by someone else (Frankfurt, 1978; Pollard, 2006b). Typically, we can interrupt the activity of an industrial machine at any time (although not necessarily safely) by turning the machine off or by giving the appropriate commands, even though the activity that the machine performs is *not* our own action.

[44] As Pollard himself notices, it is possible to exercise a certain level of control on certain behaviors that are *not* actions, such as breathing. But, contrary to habitual actions, our control over these behaviors is very limited. For instance, we can maintain our control over time: we cannot stop breathing for more than few minutes, we cannot (with the help of drugs) avoid falling asleep for days, and we cannot suppress our reflex to move our hand away from a burning surface in those occasions in which we do not effortfully force ourselves to do otherwise.

Nevertheless, *intervention control* and the relationship that habits bear to agency together might provide, in Pollard's view, good arguments for considering habitual "actions" to be *actions*, yet they do not grant habitual actions the status of *intentional actions*, and in his view only actions that are *intentional* (under *some* description) are *actions*. The intentionality of habitual actions, as Pollard sees it, does not need to stem from psychological states of the agent being caused of his or her actions, but rather habitual actions exhibit some sort of "intrinsic" intentionality.

Pollard does not discuss the intentionality of habitual actions much in depth. He simply claims that the intentionality of habitual actions relies in their teleological structure: such actions have a goal: one's habitual action of driving to work every weekday has the goal that the agent gets to work in the usual way, and one's habitual action of turning on the light when entering a dark room has the goal that the agent is able to see in the room.

Not all habitual actions need to fit our goals in a certain moment. As we have seen in Chapter II, for instance, habitual action slips often conflict with our initial goals, same as those bad habits we want to get rid of – such as drinking coffee at any "coffee break", or sitting whenever we have chance to do so – conflicts with other goals we might have, such as controlling our caffeine intake, staying healthy, etc. Yet, even those habitual actions that we execute against some of our goals have an intrinsic goal: the goal of drinking something that increases our

concentration or of taking part in a social ritual, or the goal of resting our body.

In his brief discussion of the issue, Pollard does not deal with the objection that many activities that are not actions – if not most activities – also have an intrinsic goal: our respiratory and digestive processes have obvious goals, and activities performed by inanimate objects also have a goal. The difference here seems to be that habitual actions fulfill a goal that is set, at some point during the acquisition of a certain habit, by the agent executing them. It is the habitual driver that set the goal of reaching his workplace, and in accomplishing his goal developed his or her habit of driving to work.

However, in order to claim that goals that are set at some time in the history of a certain habit) it is not required to make reference to a concept of "intrinsic intentionality" of habitual action, as the idea that the agent has guidance, or some form of control, over his or her own (habitual) actions might already incorporate this idea. Indeed, it sounds intuitive that when we guide a certain course of action, we normally guide it *to* the fulfillment of a certain goal.

This idea might have been better captured by Di Nucci (2008, 2011, 2013), according to whom guidance alone is sufficient for granting actions (including habitual actions) the status of *intentional actions*, and with this Di Nucci departs both from Frankfurt's and from Pollard's view.

Di Nucci's conception of *guidance* does not differ substantially from that of Frankfurt of from Pollard's idea of *intervention control*, if not in one respect: that the agent's action must be under his or her guidance *under a specific description*.

This, in his view, also allows us to obviate a problem that would arise if we took as true that guidance alone is a sufficient criterion for the individuation of action: that of distinguishing between intentional and unintentional actions. Frankfurt would not face this issue because of his claim that all actions – unlike "intentional movements" – are caused by the agent's psychological states. Indeed, while *intentional actions* are performed in accordance with the agent's intentions, *unintentional actions* are not – but they are still caused by intention with which the agent fails to comply (e.g., miscalculating in the act of calculating). However, if intentions are out of the consideration, then intentional und unintentional actions could *prima facie* look alike: the agent is guiding his or her own action and at any time has the possibility to intervene on his or her performance, even though the results is not what he expected or hoped for.

To deal with this problem, Di Nucci adds the condition that movements count as *intentional actions* under a certain description only if they are under the agent's guidance *under that description*. For instance, Alice's flipping the light switch is intentional under the description "turning on the light" if and only if flipping the light switch is under her guidance

under this description. For a better understand of this idea, let us consider examples of movements that Di Nucci regards as *unintentional actions* and of movements that he regards as not actions at all.

An example of movements that do not constitute an action (although others might regard them as an unintentional actions) are those performed by a person that, because of an earthquake, involuntarily spills coffee someone's trousers. Assuming that the person could not know in advanced about the earthquake, the movements are not under the agent's guidance under any description because there is no way the agent could have intervened on them.

By contrast, in the often-discussed example of someone inadvertently alerting a prowler by turning on the light (Davidson, 1963) the agent has guidance over his or her own movements because he or she could intervene on them by preventing, inhibiting, or correcting them and because of this such movements count as an *action*. Yet, his or her movements constitute an *unintentional* action, under the description "alerting the prowler", because the agent has no clue – and could not be reasonable expected to know or find out – that a prowler is in the house, and thus he or she could not intervene on his or her movements under the particular description "alerting the prowler (by turning on the light)."

The idea that the agent does not need *to know* about the outcome of his or her own action, but it is sufficient that he or she can be *reasonably expected to know or find out* about it for such an action to be intentional

exposes Di Nucci's account to a criticism advanced by Asma (2018), according to whom his account fails to distinguish between *intentional* and *unintentional actions*. Taking as an example to case of the prowler, she claims:

> If the agent knows that there have been a lot of burglaries in her neighborhood she can reasonably be expected to know or find out whether someone is prowling. This, even if she does not in fact check whether there is someone there or has the intention to alert the prowler, if there is a prowler and this prowler is alerted by what she does, in Di Nucci's theory she alerts the prowler intentionally while flipping the switch.

What Asma aims to show here is that Di Nucci's account make intentional actions that clearly are not so. And, because of this, she concluded that a distinction between *intentional* and *unintentional* actions can only be made through an appeal to causation by the agent's intentions (or equivalent psychological states).

However, it is not clear to me why Di Nucci sets as a condition for actions to be intentional under a certain description that the agent is *reasonably expected to know or find out* about the outcome of his or her action rather

than that the agent *knows*, in the lack of unexpected and unpredictable happenings, the outcome of his or her action.

I suspect that his choice is motivated by considerations of responsibility, that he wants to *judge intentional* only those actions for which the agent should be regarded responsible. Indeed, it seems in line with our intuition to claim that an agent should be held responsible for the consequences of his or her own action if he or she *could have known* about such consequences. For instance, if by turning on the light the agent woke up a baby, and by starting to cry the baby woke up the neighbors, in judging the degree of responsibility that the agent has over the outcome of his or her action we would have probably been interested in knowing the agent knew that a baby was sleeping in the room. However, arguably, it does not follow from the fact that an agent is responsible for his or her action, under a certain description, that she such an action is *intentional* – it is most likely the other way around. We could judge someone blameworthy for an action that has been performed unintentionally, as in the case of an involuntary homicide or, less dramatically, for small mistakes performed out of absent-mindedness.

Di Nucci's theory of guidance has the advantage, compared to Frankfurt's and Pollard's view, that it can alone account for habitual actions being *intentional actions* without appealing respectively to causation by the agent's psychological states (which, we assume here, are not necessarily causing habitual actions) or to some form of intrinsic intentionality, being

thus a more parsimonious theory. Furthermore, it captures and provides a good explanation for the intuition that we have some special form of control over our habitual actions – also when performed against some of our intentions, as in the case of habitual action slips – which we lack over other kinds of behaviors.

Yet, as we will see in the next section, appealing to some notion of control is not the only solution that has been proposed to account for habitual actions to be *actions*. Chan (1995) proposed a solution according to which habitual actions are *actions* in virtue of being associated with some special phenomenological experience, the experience of *agency*, and belong to the category of *non-intentional* actions.

4. Habitual Actions as Non-Intentional Actions

Chan's (1995) categorization of habitual actions as *non-intentional actions* is motivated by the idea, which he endorses, that intentional actions are performed for reasons.[45]

In his view, intentions form against a background of reasons for acting, they are outcome of a process of practical reasoning which leads to a commitment to a certain course of action that is in line with the agent's

[45] The rationality of habitual actions and the issue of whether they are performed for reasons will not be discussed here. However, for the reader interested in such an issue, Pollard (2003) claims that habitual actions are not performed for reasons and discusses the possibility that they could nevertheless be rational actions.

reasons for acting that way.[46] And the connecting point between the reasons that the agent has for performing a certain action and the action performed for such reasons is an *intention* to act (according to the agent's reasons).[47]

However, as habitual actions are not (necessarily) caused by intention, they are not performed for reasons, and, if only actions performed for reasons count as intentional, then habitual actions are *not* intentional.

Yet, Chan's claims, habitual actions are still *actions*, and what makes them actions, in his view, is that they are associated with a special phenomenology, an *experience of acting*, which is proper to actions but not to reflexes and other types of bodily movements. According to Chan, such an experience is present when an agent is able to tell, immediately and without recourse to observation, that he or she is acting, or, when failing to act, that he or she was trying to do so.

To explain this idea through an example, consider the case of a person, Irene, that has the habit of checking her email as soon as she reaches her office and turns on the computer. Typically, Irene enters the office, sits at the desk, turns on the laptop, and moves the mouse toward the icon of

[46] Unintentional actions, in Chan's view, are also performed for reasons: the agent performs a certain action with a certain intention that emerges from a process of practical reasoning, yet the action that he performs brings about unintended effects.

[47] Chan (1995) does not discuss in this paper what he considers *reasons for action*. typical examples of reasons for acting are beliefs, desires, obligations, moral conventions, etc. I will assume here that Chan does not uses "reasons for action" with any special meaning.

a browser, on which she would then click and proceed to log in in her email account. If someone would interrupt her asking what she is doing, she would be able to reply that she is checking her e-mail. Or, if someone tried to prevent her from checking the email, for instance by deleting the icon of the browser, she would probably experience surprise and immediately start looking for an alternative way to accomplish the task.[48] This, in Chan's view, would indicate that she was acting because she knew that she was *doing* something (checking her email) or at least trying to do so.

On the other hand, if Irene took a drug that prevent her involuntary movements, such as facial expressions or involuntary gesticulation during a conversation, she might not even notice the effect (unless an experience of pain or discomfort were associated with it), and she would likely not be able to tell that she was "trying to be expressive" or to perform a certain unvoluntary movement.

There are two possible objections to Chan's theory that I can think of. Firstly, one might object that the fact that the agent, when interrupted, shows knowledge of what he or she was doing (or trying to do) indicates

[48] Worth noticing, Chan's proposal also can account for habitual action slips. Consider the case of a person, Juri, who intends to take a bus to the park but, out of habit, is about to leave the bus instead next to his workplace. If someone would prevent him from leaving, he would probably realize that he was about to leave at the bus stop next to his workplace and would thank the person from preventing it. This indicates that even the person wrongly acting out of habit is in some sense aware of what she is doing or trying to do.

that his or her action (or attempt to act) was caused by an intention. I dealt with this objection in Chapter II, in the context of arguing that intentions are not required for the causation of habitual action. A second possible objection is that one's knowledge that he or she is acting (or trying to do so) suggests that actions, including habitual actions, necessarily involve awareness, which Pollard (2003) and Di Nucci (2008) deny.

I think that the main issue is with what is meant by "awareness of acting." What Pollard and Di Nucci might want to deny is that we are *consciously* aware, at any time we perform an action, that we are performing that action. habitual actions are actions we typically perform distractedly, having our mind focused on something else, and it is because of this that habitual action slips are common mistakes. Yet, if it is true – as both Di Nucci and Pollard maintain – that we have come form of control (*intervention control* or *guidance*) over our habitual actions, then it sounds plausible that there is some sense in which we are aware of them.[49]

However, even leaving this possibility aside, one could argue that what really is required is that the agent, at the moment in which he or she is interrupted or that something prevents him or her from acting, realizes that there was an action that she was performing or trying to perform; but

[49] This is also a different sense of awareness than "bodily awareness." The possibility of performing a limited number of actions without bodily awareness has been studied by Milner and Goodale (1995) and discussed by Pacherie (2008). Different senses of "awareness" are also discussed in Pacherie (2008). More on the topic of awareness in action can be found in Haggard *et al.* (1999, 2002, 2003a, 2003b).

it is not necessary that the agent is at any time aware of what he or she is doing. For instance, in the case that we just discussed, we could argue that all that is required for Irene to be acting (habitually) is that she *becomes aware*, as her action is hindered, that she was trying to check her email, even though she was not (consciously) aware[50] of that before, perhaps busy with other thoughts.

There are several benefits of introducing a category of *non-intentional* actions. Firstly, it can account straightforwardly for an intuitive distinction between habitual actions – and other kinds of actions that might fall in the same category[51] – and actions following decisional processes. It could be claimed, indeed, that only the latter are intentional and that they are so, perhaps, in virtue of being caused be the agent's psychological states. This would be an option to limit the scope of the Causal Theory to some actions, intentional actions, without rejecting it completely.

Secondly, it might account for a distinction in the degree of responsibility that we intuitively have over actions that are fully decisional compared to actions that we largely execute automatically. Indeed, we could claim that

[50] A main source of misunderstandings, when discussing about awareness in the connect of action, might come from the idea that awareness *must* be conscious or that being conscious and being aware are two ways of expressing the same state. This is an important topic itself, which I have no space to discuss here. However, in my view, there is at least a sense of awareness that is detached by consciousness, and that is tied to the notion of control, guidance, and can be observed, e.g., in the exercise of skills.

[51] Chan (1995) discusses, e.g., *mannerisms*.

we are fully responsible for actions that are fully intentional, but we have a reduced degree of responsibility over non-intentional actions. a reason why this might be interesting for us is that it could help us to deal with cases in which habitual action slips have very unfortunate consequences.[52]

Finally, it would free us from the need to introduce a counterintuitive distinction between "intentional action" and "intended action", which might be required if we were to argue that not all intentional actions are caused by intentions (or alike psychological states) – unless separate reasons exist for introducing such a distinction.

Leaving the difference categorization of actions based on their intentionality, Chan's view is also compatible with the Guidance Theory of Action.[53] One could argue, for instance, that what makes habitual actions effectively *actions* is that they are guided by the agent and that they are associated with the particular *phenomenology of agency* or that the experience of agency stems from the agent's guiding his or her action.

[52] Amaya discusses, for instance, case such those of parents driving straight to work and forgetting to drop their kids to the kindergarten, leaving the kids many hours in the car and possibly dying of hyperthermia.

[53] Chan himself claims that he can grant that the agent has guidance over his or her habitual action, and that the only thing he denies is that this guidance comes through intentions of the agent.

In the next section, I will try to bring together the advantages of the Guidance Theory and of Chan's theory, in suggesting that habitual actions are non-intentional controlled actions.

5. Habitual Actions, Intentionality, and Control

We have already seen that the idea that our actions are guided, and that it is this that makes them *actions*, is not incompatible with Chan's view, according to which makes some of our activities *actions* is that they are associated with the special phenomenology of agency. Indeed, as I mentioned in the previous section, the phenomenology of agency might be a result of the guidance that the agent has over his or her own actions.

However, the views discussed disagree on an important matter: that of the *intentionality* of actions, including habitual actions. According to Frankfurt, Pollard, and Di Nucci, all actions are *intentional* (under some description), and the intentionality of action comes respectively from the agent's psychological states, can be intrinsic to actions that even thought are not caused by intentions have a goal (in the case of habitual actions), or is rooted in the action being under agential guidance (under a certain description). By contrast, in Chan's view there are actions that are *not* intentional (nor unintentional), and those include habitual actions, which belong to the category of *non-intentional* actions.

We have already seen that postulating the category of *non-intentional* actions has important advantages: it can straightforwardly account for an intuitive distinctions between habitual actions and actions that follow decisional processes (such as the action of buying a one way ticket to Australia), it could perhaps help to account for a difference in the degree of responsibility that we have over actions that we decide to do and those that we execute to a large extent automatically, and it would not force us to introduce a counterintuitive distinction between actions between intended and intentional actions.

Furthermore, distinguishing between *intentional* and *non-intentional* actions would leave us space to claim that the Causal Theory of Action is still valid as a theory of *intentional* action, which is a claim that some endorses of the Causal Theory might be willing to accept. Indeed, it has already been recognized, for instance by Goldman (1970), that the Causal theory is not well suited to account for cases analogous to that of habitual.

Because of all the above reasons, considering habitual actions *non-intentional* seems to be the better option than insisting that they are fully intentional.

The accounts of Frankfurt, Di Nucci, and Pollard all appeal to some notion of control – *guidance* and *intervention control* – and such move so far seems to be the most promising, if we want to account for habitual actions being *actions*. Furthermore, we can appeal to the idea that habitual actions are under the agent's control in order to account for the particular

phenomenology of agency associated with them (as to other kinds of actions).

However, until now there has not been much said on the kind of control that is involved in habitual actions; indeed, the focus has been in large part on the question of whether habitual actions represent a challenge to the Causal Theory of Action. Although providing a detailed account of this kind of control falls outside the scope of this chapter and dissertation, and should rather motivate further research on the topic, there are few things that we can easily notice, the most important of which is that there seem to be multiple types of control that an agent has over his or her habitual actions.

Firstly, control as the capacity to intervene within the course of action. that is, the agent is capable of making the required adjustments when necessary. This is the type of control which seem to be in place, for example, when the habitual driver without thinking accelerates and decelerates to adjust his or her speed to the traffic conditions. This is likely the main notion of control that Frankfurt and Pollard had in mind in developing their notions of *guidance* and *intervention control* respectively, and it can be well illustrated through Frankfurt's example involving a driver whose auto is coasting downhill just due to gravity.

In Frankfurt's view, indeed, a driver whose auto is coasting downhill due to the simple gravity is still guiding his auto as long as he does not intervene on the auto's coasting because he is satisfied with the speed and

direction; indeed, what really matters for an activity to be purposive and thus under the agent's guidance is that the agent is, in principle, prepared and in the position to intervene, were it willed or necessary.

Something worth discussing here, is how we should understand the idea that guided actions are purposive, or better where the purposiveness of actions should come from. We have already seen that, in Frankfurt's view, not all actions are caused by intentions, as *intentional movements*, which also are *actions*, are not. Intentional movements are also actions in virtue of being under the agent's guidance, and this suggests that in order for an action to be purposive it must not necessarily be caused by an intention of the agent, or by equivalent psychological states.

This concept has in part being captured by Pollard's idea that habitual actions are intrinsically intentional because they have a goal, e.g., one's habitual driving to his or her workplace has the goal that the workplace is reached by him or her. But we have also seen that many activities that are not actions also have goals, including activities of our organism that certainly are not under our agential guidance, such as digestive processes.

In which relevant sense are habitual actions purposive in a way that other activities of our organism are not? A first difference between the goals that our digestive or respiratory system have and the kind of goals that are proper of habitual actions is that these latter have been, at some point in the developmental history of a habit, established by the agent. That is, the agent that habitually drives to work has formed his or her habit with the

goal of reaching his or her workplace. It is likely, then, that such a goal underlies the agent's performance of his or her habitual actions whenever such an action is executed, and even in the case in which the agent intends to act otherwise, such as in the case of a habitual action slip. Indeed, it is possible that the agent's habitual driving to work maintains such goal also on an occasion in which the agent mistakenly drives to work on a holiday while intending to drive elsewhere.

Of course, there can be habits that we assumed over time without ever intending to reach certain goals by executing certain habitual actions, such as those habits that have been inculcated in us by our parents, for instance brushing our teeth before going to sleep or right after breakfast. What can be said here is that, even though we did not have, at that age, the precise goal of brushing our teeth or of doing something for our own health, there still was a goal that we had as agent which underlined the development of such habits, and that can be, e.g., that of pleasing our parents, avoiding or punishment.[54]

A second type of control is that over the initiation of the action. An agent is able, in normal circumstances, to refrain from performing a certain action by doing something else or nothing at all. Exceptions are, as we have seen in Chapter II, habitual action slips, which are performed against

[54] It is not unlikely that our goal over time becomes effectively that of maintaining our mouth clean and healthy. Yet, it is important, for the purpose of the discussion here, that a goal established by the agent underlined the development of our habit and thus made our correspondent habitual action purposive also at a later time.

the agent's intention to act otherwise. But habitual actions slips are indeed exceptional and can typically be avoided by paying the due attention to one's ways of acting. In most cases, when we decided to not execute a certain habitual action in a certain occasion, for instance not having breakfast on a day in which we planned a blood test, we simply succeed in doing so. Similarly, the agent is in control of when and how to initiate a habitual action. We can decide to delay our morning shower or breakfast, to wait until we pick up our ringing phone, etc. And we can decide to execute habitual action in a slightly different way, to adapt to the particular circumstances of the moment. For instance, we can decide to prepare our breakfast silently, when we know that someone is sleeping in a nearby room.

Thirdly, control over the agent's *habit*: the agent is normally able to change his or her habits by learning new habits or getting rid of old habits, although both of them might require some effort, especially at the beginning of the process. Books and advises on how to change one's habits populate libraries and the internet, and some of them are also based on methods that have been shown efficacious, such as that of forming implementation intentions – intentions specifying a certain course of action to undergo whenever a specific situation is presented (e.g., Adriaanse *et al*., 2011). Health related habits such as that of opting by default for low sugar and low processed food when the choice is given or doing a brief yoga routine in the morning can be created this way.

Similarly, bad habits such as that of drinking coffee at any break can be altered by forming an implementation intention to, e.g., drink a glass of water instead.

Finally, there seem to be an additional form of control that agents have over habitual actions that in my view is not completely captured by the concept of *guidance* as it is often employed in the philosophy of action. Indeed, agents are not only capable of making adjustments in the course of their actions in order to compensate for eventual interferences, when "something goes wrong" but they are also able to prevent – within certain limits – things from "going wrong." In other words, the agent does not just become active and assumes control over his or her course of action when it is needed to do so, but rather he or she is actively and continuously monitoring the situation and thus preventing as far as possible the need for adjustments. This type of control is clearly observed in the exercise of complex skills but also in place in the performance of everyday activities, and, as I see it, it stems from the agent's having the *skill* to execute the activities in question. Because of this, I will name it 'skillful control.'

Likely, an acrobat, e.g., is constantly monitoring the position of his or her body: he or she is not only "ready to intervene" when appropriate adjustments will be required, as it is conveyed by the concept of guidance, but he or she is already actively controlling his or her skillful performance.

Importantly, this control does not have to be conscious nor triggered by psychological states of the agent. Rather, it is a form of embodied control that we develop in the process of acquiring a new skill. When we learn to walk or to bike, we acquire control over those activities, just as we do when we learn to dance, or to execute other sorts of complex activities. The more we gain control over a certain kind of activity, the more "our body knows" which muscles to activate when, how to keep balance, how to prevent injuries. A skillful dancer, for instance, knows which muscles to activate when turning, when it is appropriate to stiffen and when to soften and relax muscles. He or she knows how to manage his or her flexibility and also how to maintain his or her axis, transferring the weight when appropriate, and keeping his or her balance while executing complex movements. The dancer is at any time in control of what he or she does because he or she has acquired the skill of dancing.

What emerges from the discussion here and in the previous sections then seems to indicate that control, in different forms, can account for habitual actions being *actions* as we do not have the same kind of control over habitual actions that we have over different kinds of behaviors which show some similarities to habitual actins – such as reflexes or other kinds of involuntary movements not resulting from intentions of the agent. Furthermore, the fact that habitual actions are controlled by the agent can easily explain the typical phenomenology that is associated with them

(just as with other actions), and because of which an agent knows, when he or she is acting out of habit, that he or she is acting or trying to act.

Thus, putting now together the benefits of the guidance view discussed in the second section and of Chan's view, we can claim that habitual actions are *non-intentional* and *controlled* actions, and we can therefore account for the status of habitual actions as actions despite not being caused by the agent's intentions (or equivalent psychological states), while leaving space for the Causal Theory of Action to be a theory about *intentional* actions.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the problem that the claim that habitual actions do not require causation by the agent's psychological states brings about concerning the status of habitual actions as *actions*, their *intentionality*, and the validity of the Causal theory of Action as a (general) theory of action. I proceeded then by discussing two different alternative ways of explaining what makes habitual actions *actions*. One view that appeals to the notion of *guidance* and the other that appeals to the *phenomenology of agency* associate with habitual actions. Those view also differ in their understanding of the intentionality of habitual actions, which are seen as fully *intentional* from the endorsers of the first view, and as *non-intentional* actions by endorsers of the second view. Finally, I tried to

bring together the advantages of either view by proposing that habitual actions are *non-intentional controlled actions*. Although my proposal is so far at best sketchy, it might be worth developing it further, as it provides a way of accounting for the agency and intentionality of habitual actions while also leaving space for the Causal Theory as a theory of intentional actions. In particular, the notion of control in place in the performance of habitual actions should be better spelled out, which would require conducting further research on the topic. But one important thing that we have noticed in this chapter is that several forms of control are in place in the exercise of habitual actions which are not all necessarily associated with the performance of activities other than actions.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have argued that habitual actions are not necessarily caused by intentions and that their performance can rather be explained by the agent's habits – acquired dispositions to perform certain actions in the situation to which they become associated through repetition – and by the role that the specific situations play in triggering the activation of such habits. I argued, then, that this explanation can be extended also to many of the actions that are executed by the agent within the performance of skilled activities: the, so-called, "subsidiary actions." Indeed, by paying attention to the process of skill acquisition, we can notice that many subsidiary actions are habitual actions. I discussed, then, the implications that the claim that habitual actions are not necessarily caused by intentions has concerning their status actions, their intentionality, and the validity of the Causal Theory of Action as a general theory of action.

I proposed that habitual actions are non-intentional, controlled actions. The control that the agent can impose over the execution of habitual actions is what grants them the status of actions, and their non-intentionality is what distinguishes them from another kind of actions, intentional and unintentional actions, which are intentional in virtue of being appropriately caused by the agent's intentions or equivalent psychological states. Furthermore, the distinction between fully intentional and non-intentional actions has an important repercussion, as

it leaves space for the Causal Theory of Action to be a valid theory of intentional actions, even if we accept that it is not suitable to account for habitual actions.

The conclusions of this dissertation could pave the path for future research directions in philosophy, cognitive science, and in the related empirical disciplines. In particular, further research would be beneficial regarding the nature of the mechanisms that lead agents to act habitually in the appropriate situations, as well as regarding the different kinds of control which the agents are able to exercise over the initiation and execution of their habitual actions.

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Declaration

I declare that this document has been composed by myself, and describes my own work, unless otherwise acknowledged in the text. It has not been accepted in any previous application for a degree. All sources of information have been specifically acknowledged.

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