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Habits and Akrasia

Is it meaningful to conceive of akrasia as a bad habit?

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Introduction

The objective of this thesis is to contribute to the debate on akrasia by exploring answers to the question why people engage in actions that they themselves consider bad, undesirable, or unnecessary. This question is asking about the motivation behind a type of actions agents perform, where the action performed evidently contradicts the agent's prior deliberation about which action to perform and the subsequent decision for action resulting from this deliberation. In other words, the action goes against the agent's intention. This phenomenon is also known as akrasia or weakness of will.

Although philosophers have debated about akrasia for a very long time, I find the answers provided for why akrasia occurs unsatisfactory. I will focus on two of these answers here. The first one comes from the Standard Story of Agency, which is a paradigmatic example of an internalist theory of agency, i.e. a theory that assumes a strong connection between certain mental states and intentional action.

According to the Standard Story, akrasia is the result of a non-adherence to a principle of rationality, which maintains that agents should do what they judge best all things considered. Thus, akratic action gets tagged as irrational, which substantially complicates the search for ways to avoid it and diminishes the rational status of agents engaging in it. It also puts it at the margin of research interests, given that the focus of analytic action theory has been to explain rational actions.

The second explanation of akrasia I argue against is the one of Richard Holton, who distinguishes akrasia from weakness of will and maintains that the latter is substantially different because it depends on an irrational reconsideration of a resolution. Firstly, I find the distinction between akrasia and weakness of will dubious on the grounds that if we recognize reconsideration as an action, we can reduce weakness of will to akrasia. And secondly, similarly to the problem with the Standard Story's explanation, Holton deems weakness of will irrational, which obstructs further avenues for research. Importantly, Holton explains the irrationality of weakness of will by reference to the habitual nature of the reconsideration of a prior intention. This makes Holton's theory dependent on a problematic view of habits as mindless automatic behaviors.

By discussing some of the weaknesses of the above accounts of akrasia, I hope to set up the stage for the core argument of this thesis, which is to show that the concept of habits can help

us better understand akrasia, without the need to reduce the phenomenon to irrationality. This is accomplished in two steps. Firstly, I show that with the inclusion of habitual actions into the realm of intentional actions, we gain a minimal solution to the problem of akrasia, for cases where an agent has strong habits. Secondly, I argue for the more general point that habits are at the core of processes of deliberation and decision-making, which helps us understand more broadly construed cases of akrasia as an instance of conflicting habits.

This works as follows, on the one hand, we have a habit, which has developed to help the agent cope with certain types of situations, and on the other, we have the habit of deliberating and planning. The result of the habitual action of deliberation is an intention to perform a certain action but this result gets contradicted by the situation-specific habit the agent has already formed. This results in akrasia, or intentionally acting against one's judgment.

We have good grounds to modernize our understanding of habits and recognize them as intentional. The philosophical foundations for this modernization are found in the pragmatist philosophies of Willaim James and John Dewey, as well as more recent psychological research, which provides further evidence for the adoption of a view of habits as automatic to a degree but also as intentional. These insights into the nature of habits can also help us understand intentional action in a new way, which does not over-emphasize the role of the faculty of reason in it. With habits as the underlying foundation of agency, we see that reasoning and deliberation could also be conceived as habit-based capacities. This allows us to move on from a mentalistic model of agency and also to factor in contextual and environmental influences in our theory of action.

In Chapter 1, I present the problem of akrasia and the two most popular attempts at explaining it – Davidson's and Holton's. I argue that these two accounts fall short of capturing the phenomenon properly because they do not (fully) recognize the role habits play in it. Davidson's theory does not account for this role because it puts habitual action in the same category as compulsive behavior. In Holton's framework, habits are a key element, however, they are used to reinforce the argument for the irrationality of akrasia. I argue that this is due to a limited understanding of habits as mindless and unintentional behaviors.

Chapter 2, discusses the origin of the mistaken definition of habits. Here I also present counter-arguments that reinforce the view that habitual actions are intentional, without their automaticity getting in the way. Here I also introduce the minimal solution to the problem of akrasia, where the agent has an established habit that is at the core of the contradiction of a prior intention.

After establishing that the intention-contradicting action in cases of akrasia can be performed out of habit, in Chapter 3, I extend the definition of habits along the lines of the pragmatic theories of Willam James and John Dewey. This aims to show, that an even more fundamental theoretical shift can be facilitated with the help of the concept of habit. When we consider the pragmatic definition of habit, we are in a position to see that habits are also at the core of capacities such as rationality and deliberation.

Building on the pragmatist's foundation, in Chapter 4, I argue that all cases of akrasia involve habitual actions and at their core are a conflict between habits. Here, I comment on the theories of akrasia developed by Bromhall and by Burch, who reach similar conclusions to mine, albeit by taking slightly different roads. Bromhall's account of akrasia is developed primarily on the theoretical foundations of Willam James' *Principles of Psychology* and requires a crucial modernization. Burch on the other hand approaches the problem of akrasia phenomenologically first and foremost concluding that akrasia is a conflict of our existential abilities. In my opinion, Burch stops a tad short of recognizing that existential abilities are in fact made up of pragmatic habits.

Chapter 1

Akasia and Mainstream Action Theory

Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the problem of akasia and how it has been handled in the action theoretical discourse. My aim here is to establish some common vocabulary that I will build upon in the latter chapters. First I begin by briefly introducing Davidson's account of agency, which I refer to as the Standard Story of Agency¹. I continue with explaining what the problem of akasia consists of and how it has the potential to upset the Standard Story. Then I proceed by critically discussing Davidson and Holton's attempts to account for akasia, arguing that their attempts at overcoming akasia unavoidably reduce it to irrationality, where this move might not be necessary. Davidson and Holton are constrained to deem akasia irrational because their theoretical background does not allow for another source of intentional agency besides deliberation leading to the formation of intentions.

1.1. The Standard Story

Before we dive into the problem of akasia some theoretical background is required. A proper place to start is Davidson's Standard Story of Agency which has become the hallmark theory of agency in the last century. Much can be said about this account, but the most relevant features worth mentioning here are its internalistic nature and its rationalistic approach toward action.

The Standard Story of Agency is an attempt to explain what distinguishes actions from other events (s. Davidson 2001, p. 4). It approaches this challenge by asking the question 'Why?' an action occurs. By providing an answer to this question Davidson reaches the conclusion that what distinguishes actions from other observable phenomena is the *reason* for which they are

¹ Here I am following Velleman 1992 in the designation of the Davidsonian account of agency "The Standard Story of human action" (Velleman 1992, p. 461)

performed² (s. Davidson 2001, p. 4). The reason is also postulated to be the distinguishing feature of action from mere behavior. This theoretical move opens up the question of what reasons are, or rather how they serve their action-distinguishing function.

Davidson's prominent account of reasons and their role in agency is found in his paper "Actions, Reasons, Causes". In this paper, Davidson argues that an action is caused by a primary reason, consisting of a belief-desire pair. The desire is for a particular end or goal, and the belief is that action x can get me to this desired state. The result is a motivating reason for me to perform action x which I believe is conducive to my desired end, i.e. an intention to x. Such an intention is not merely represented in consciousness it has on the one hand rationalizing force – it explains to observers why an agent did what she did – but it also has a motivational force that compels the agent to act according to it, i.e. not to do anything different than what she holds conducive of her ends. (S. Davidson 2001, p. 6)

This latter feature qualifies the Davidsonian account of agency as internalistic. Internalists maintain that there is an intrinsic connection between a person's evaluative judgments and what they end up doing (s. Stroud & Svirsky, 2021). This implies that the observed action of an agent is factual evidence in favor of the claim that at this moment in time, this agent preferred doing what she did more than doing other things available to her. In contrast, an externalistic view regarding this matter would not take the observed agency as such strong evidence that the agent acted according to her preferences. For an externalist deliberation is not at the bottom of the causal chain which results in action and there could very well be something other than the agent's evaluative judgments that motivate that agent's action (s. Stroud & Svirsky, 2021).

The Davidsonian model of agency is widely regarded as a pillar of action theory, capturing neatly the phenomenon. Although this is not to say that it comes without its problems. For example, not everyone is on board with a causal view of agency, which tends to disregard the role the agent plays in the whole affair. This is known as the problem of the disappearing agent.

If we conceptualize actions as events of bodily movement, and then ask questions about the causation of these events, we have arguably already adopted a metaphysics of action that precludes finding agents to be of central interest, since we have adopted a view that makes the triggering event the matter of central and crucial relevance. (Steward 2016, p. 79)

² It is important to note here that not the agent is providing the answer to the Why? question, but rather it is assumed by the theorist that the agent has an answer to the 'Why?' question.

There are wider and more narrow formulations of this problem, but nevertheless, it remains a central issue of The Standard Story. Proposed solutions to the problem, only make the theory more rationalistic by introducing – as Velleman for example does, another element to the story, namely the second-order backing up of desires by the agent. In this case, it is required that the agent deliberates on a meta-level about which desires of hers she would like to endorse³. (S. Velleman 1992, p. 476)

Another problem for a causal theory of action is deviant causal chains. Deviant causation refers to cases where an agent's behavior is caused by factors that are not reasons for action, although the reasons for action are present as well. This creates a problem for Davidson's theory of agency because it undermines the strict identity between reasons and causes. If there are cases where an agent's behavior is caused by factors that are not reasons for action, then it seems that reasons cannot be identical to causes.

Davidson acknowledges these difficulties in his theoretical framework and proposes to enhance his theory, by adding the phrase cause “in the right way” to claims about the causal relations between events (s. Davidson 2001, p. 79). This however might not be sufficient to properly patch the theory and at first glance looks more like a diversion maneuver rather than a proper solution.⁴

On a more general note, it seems that internalist accounts of agency end up over-intellectualizing the phenomenon of action by introducing rational restraints of what agency should look like. Conversely, this directly affects our understanding of what an agent should be conceived as, thereby making it harder to discern different kinds of agency besides the one of fully rational agents.

Internalistic theories of agency endorse the so-called deliberative action model (DAM) (s. Burch 2018, p. 941). According to this model intentional action is the result of deliberation. Bratman puts it the following way: “Full-blown action involves the conclusion of a piece of evaluative practical reasoning” (Bratman 1979, p. 170). Again here as we saw earlier in Davidson, agency is tied to a process of deliberation:

According to DAM, for every full-blown intentional action ϕ , an agent deliberates about what to do; through deliberation, she reaches the judgment that she ought to ϕ ; in light of that

³ For a discussion see Velleman (1992) and Steward (2016).

⁴ For a discussion see Hyman (2013), Mayr (2011), and McDonnell (2015)

judgment, she forms a prior intention to ϕ ; then, unless she deliberates again and changes her mind when the time to act arrives, she ϕ 's. (Burch 2018, p. 942)

Even spontaneous actions according to the DAM model, are the result of prior deliberation. In these cases, the agent is said to have some principles of rationality under which the spontaneous action at hand gets subsumed. For example, Bratman writes that when one catches a ball to avoid it hitting one's face, he does so out of the rational principle to attempt to prevent oneself from being hurt:

It may be in some cases that in catching the ball I am executing some long-standing personal policy – for example, a policy of protecting myself from flying objects. I do not have a present-directed intention specifically to catch this very ball, but my action still involves an intention namely: my general intention to protect myself in such circumstances. (Bratman 1999, p. 126)

This suggests that proponents of the DAM model feel pressured to account for all instances of agency in rationalistic terms, otherwise, they would not be speaking of agency. I am not outright denying the possibility of acting out of general intentions such as the one Bratman describes, however, it seems unaligned with the principles of theoretical parsimony that such policies or general intentions should be a primary source of explaining the simple act of catching a ball in this situation.

The abovementioned challenges to the Standard Story and other internalistic theories point to the fact that if we want to properly account for all the variety of agencies available, we should not aim at reducing it to only one faculty. This will help in distinguishing between types of agency beyond the paradigmatic human agency and with this comes the benefit of also reflecting on rationality as a scalar rather than a binary property.

Another challenge for the Standard Story which emphasizes its over-reliance on processes of deliberation as the only viable source of intentional action is akrasia. In the next section, I will briefly define akrasia and sketch the problematic aspects akrasia cases hold for any internalistic theory and for the Standard Story in particular.

1.2. The Problem of Akrasia

Cases of akrasia or weakness of will⁵ have been puzzling philosophers for a long time. Akrasia refers to the phenomenon of acting against one's better judgment or failing to act in accordance with one's intentions. A classical example of akrasia is of the smoker, who despite his conviction that smoking is bad for him and that he should quit, lights up another cigarette. Akrasia has commonly been explained as a deficiency in the agent's ability to resist his or her impulses when they conflict with their goals and beliefs. This being said, there is no unanimity about the relevant mechanisms behind akrasia, or even on a more fundamental level whether or not it exists.

Depending on prior theoretical commitments, some philosophers are inclined to go as far as to deny the existence of akrasia. Famously, such a view has been attributed to Plato, who has been said to deny akrasia because of his commitment to a certain view of human psychology, namely that people strive to act according to what they believe to be in their best interest (s. Rorty 1970, p. 50). Thus, akrasia becomes impossible, because actions, given this view of agency, are ultimate to be taken as evidence of what the agent believed to be in their best interest. This makes instances where an agent fails to act according to their interests a failure of knowledge, rather than failure of agency. Simply put, Plato maintained that the agent had a wrong belief about what their best interest was (s. Rorty 1970, p. 52).

This position depends strongly on the view that knowledge and beliefs are action-guiding states to such an extent that they could determine but also modify our desires. The idea seems to be that knowledge of what the good thing to do is should naturally lead to a change in my desires and in my actions. Although this certainly isn't impossible, it is overly optimistic to assume that such a transition from one desire to another happens smoothly. It seems that our old desire lags behind the new desires that we consciously decide to back based on the new information we encounter. This is the reason why the smoker does not just simply stop smoking the moment he learns that smoking is harmful in the long run. This overly-optimistic view about the updating

⁵ In the following, I will be using the terms "akrasia" and "weakness of will" interchangeably, despite the efforts of Richard Holton to argue for their distinctiveness (see Holton 1999). My reason for this is simple: I maintain that weakness of will, defined as an uncalled for reconsideration of a resolution (see Holton 1999), can ultimately be reduced to a conflict of an intentional contradiction of a better judgment – i.e. akrasia. This is because the mechanism that facilitates the reconsideration according to Holton himself is a "habit of reconsideration," and in my view, habits are *not* unintentional, automatic behaviors (see Holton, 2009, p. 8).

of our motivational drive based on new knowledge about the world is what prevents philosophers like Plato to acknowledge the existence of akrasia.

My stance in the ontological debate about akrasia is that even though some action-theoretical frameworks cannot account for it properly and therefore question its existence, this is rather a problem of the theory and not evidence of the impossibility or inexistence of akrasia. We are more than familiar with akrasia from our own lives and the lives of others. For example, we all have that one friend who is always late, always regrets being late, and prefers not being late, but still keeps arriving late even though in many of the situations he is in a position to avoid it, if say he left home 10 minutes earlier. We also sometimes know that we are full to the brim and prefer to stop eating but we still help ourselves to a generous serving of cheesecake for dessert. There are also the stories of last cigarettes, absolutely last cigarettes, and completely final ultimately last cigarettes, many of us have heard or even told ourselves.

The paradox of akrasia consists of akrasia's theoretical impossibility and its simultaneous ubiquity. To borrow Burch's neat formulation: "Akrasia is impossible and it happens all the time" (Burch 2018, p. 940). This tells us that our theoretical grounds for maintaining that there is a very strong link between what we judge best and what we end up doing, might not be so solid and that perhaps our rational decision-making qua deliberative process is not the sole source of intentional actions.

Akrasia is typically defined as intentionally acting against one's better judgment. This definition is common within the analytic action-theoretical community and has been made famous by the likes of Donald Davidson, Alfred Mele, and Michael Bratman. To make this definition more intuitive here is an example: I decide to do some writing today and sit down on my desk to do so. When I turn on my computer, however, I am greeted by the last episode of a TV show that I was watching last night and did not watch until the end. I act akratically when I (re)start watching the show instead of proceeding with my writing.

Such cases present a challenge for theories that define intentional action as action caused or otherwise tied to an agent's better judgment. The better judgment to do some writing in the example above did not lead to me acting accordingly and writing. Not many people would disagree that in watching the show indeed I acted, however, my action was not aligned with my better judgment but instead contradicted it. The problem here is the status of my performed action as an intentional action.

Theories that explain action by referring to the agent's mental states such as the Standard Story mentioned above rely on a strong link between what the agent thinks, desires, wishes, or prefers and what he or she ends up doing. This is what makes such an account of action internalistic, because of the connection between an agent's internal state of desire and belief to the agent's actions. This also makes such accounts vulnerable to the problem of akrasia.

According to the Standard Story, when an agent is free to choose her course of action she must end up acting according to her choosing (s. Davidson 2001, p. 23). The choice is made based on deliberation about the action options available and a selection is made according to different preferences for action an agent might have. In cases of akrasia, however, it appears that the agent then proceeds to act differently, despite having made this careful deliberate choice. What is left for the internalistic theory is to either say that the action was not intentional but rather motivated by some factors outside the agent's control, or to relax the condition that only deliberate actions can be intentional.

In what follows I will present two of the most prominent replies to these challenges, offered by Donald Davidson and Richard Holton. Common grounds for these accounts is the dismissal of akratic actions as irrational. This is a point I want to challenge by showing that akrasia in some relevant cases can be better explained not as a failure of rationality but as acting out of habit. This argument is presented in Chapter

1.3. Davidson's Account of Akrasia

Davidson's account of akrasia developed in his paper "How is Weakness of Will Possible?" Has two functions: (1) as the title suggests, it aims to prove the possibility of weakness of will⁶, against extreme internalist positions, and (2) it aims to show contrary to externalist positions how one can preserve a strong link between evaluative judgments and agency in the face of akrasia. Davidson writes:

Does it never happen that I have an unclouded, unwavering judgment that my action is not for the best, all things considered, and yet where the action I do perform has no hint of compulsion or of the compulsive? (Davidson, 1970, p. 29).

⁶ Davison himslef favored the term 'incontinance', which originates from the latin translation of 'akrasia'. (S. Davidson 2001)

This passage refers both to aims (1) and (2). On the one hand, Davidson's question points to the fact that typical internalist solutions to cases of akrasia have been to deny the phenomenon and to state that the agent was not in control of their actions, due to some strong emotion, or temptation.⁷ On the other hand, compulsion becomes a problem for the externalist, who wishes to cut the link between evaluative judgment and the actions of an agent. A challenge for such a view is to reconcile the source of the motivation for action with the notion that this action is still one of the agent's. In extreme externalist theories, it might seem that the actions of the agent are dictated by some alien force (s. Stroud & Svirsky, 2021).

The possibility for akrasia Davidson introduces is tightly connected with a certain type of judgment called *all-things-considered* judgment. An all-things-considered judgment combines many *prima facie* judgments to aggregate a preference for some option based on many different relational factors (s. Davidson 2001, p. 40). A *prima facie* judgment is the judgment that option 1 is better than option 2 in relation to some quality. For example, 1 is *prima facie* better than 2 because 1 is cheaper than 2. From such a judgment it would be fallacious to conclude that 1 is *all-out* better than 2 because only one aspect was considered, namely price. (S. Davidson 2001, p. 37)

The more aspects are considered the clearer the ranking of the options becomes, but as human agents with limited information, we are not capable of reaching the full-blown conclusion that option 1 is all-out better than option 2. For Davidson here lies the possibility of akrasia. This is because the claim against akrasia, for Davidson, is expressed in the conclusion reached from assuming the following premises:

P1: If an agent wants to do *a* more than he wants to do *b* and he believes himself free to do either *a* or *b*, then he will intentionally do *a* if he does either *a* or *b* intentionally.

P2: If an agent judges that it would be better to do *a* than to do *b*, then he wants to do *a* more than he wants to do *b*. (Davidson 2001, p. 23)

In the second premise, we see that the judgment of the agent is an all-out judgment of *a* being better than *b*. But an agent can only have an *all-things-considered* judgment about which option is better. Therefore the second premise is never contradicted in cases of akrasia, and this Davidson takes to speak for their possibility.

⁷ Such a solution is typically attributed to Aristotle. For an in-depth review of the Aristotelian views on akrasia see Rorty (1970)

There is however the obvious question, how then does akrasia work if it is possible and why does it present such a peculiarity? Davidson maintains that another principle has to be recognized, i.e. the principle of continence as he calls it, which requires the agent to “perform the action judged best on the basis of all available relevant reasons” (Davidson 2001, p. 41). Accordingly, a non-akratic agent would reach her all-things-considered judgment in favor of doing *a* and would subsequently do *a*, as if it was the all-out better option. In contrast, the akratic agent would reach his all-things-considered judgment in favor of doing *a* and would contradict the principle of continence by proceeding to do *b*. In so doing, he will be acting irrationally, according to Davidson, because the principle of continence is directly tied to the rationalizing function of reasons stipulated by The Standard Story.

As a reminder, reasons in the Davidsonian framework rationalize actions as well as cause them. The akratic agent has a reason for acting as he did, but that reason is not sufficient for it to have caused the action in light of all the all things considered judgment to do something else, therefore it is irrational of the agent to have so acted (s. Stroud & Svirskey 2021). In summary, for Davidson akrasia is possible because the principles out of which its impossibility is derived are too robust for requiring an *all-out* judgment where an agent only has an *all-things-considered* judgment. Further, akrasia is irrational, because the akratic agent violates the continence principle which demands that the action judged best *all-things-considered* should be the action performed.

The problem of akrasia poses yet another challenge for The Standard Story of agency. If someone would want to keep The Standard Story of agency upright in the face of akrasia cases it looks like there are two viable options: either (1) it has to be proven that the self-control of the agent was obstructed by some external force – such as an irresistible temptation, or another coercive influence, or alternatively (2) the rationality of the agent has to give, making akratic actions irrational. As we saw already Davidson takes the second route which puts akratic actions in this weird state of being intentional because they are after all performed for reasons, while simultaneously also being irrational, because the reasons the agent has for performing them are not the proper reasons to act on (s. Davidson 2001, p. 41). But why would Davidson take the second (2) route instead of the first (1) alternative?

This is because if an agent's action occurs under coercion, it might not be in line with the agent's better judgment. In such a situation even though the agent judges action *r* to be better than action *q*, she is brought to *q-ing* by the coercive force of a strong desire, fear, or jealousy, to

name a few examples.⁸ Here some other force but the agent takes control over the agent's actions, therefore the action can contradict what the agent has judged best to do.

However, this explanation has the unwanted consequence of explaining away the agential input to the whole affair, and Davidson, among others, has argued that it doesn't truly refer to akrasia⁹ (s. Davidson 2001, p. 29). This is because the agent is not free to do otherwise, but he or she is made to submit due to the coercive force. In other words, the agent still acts on his or her better judgment, which however is determined by the coercive force and would have been distinctly different if this force was absent.

For these reasons, Davidson adopts a definition of akrasia, which excludes cases of coercion, by explicitly stating that the agent should be free to do otherwise when deciding how to act (s. Davidson 2001, p. 23). Davidson rejects the view from (1) which equates akrasia with loss of control in the face of strong temptation, but for him, it is still a defective form of agency because it is in violation of “the principle of continence”, which maintains that “[an agent should] perform the action judged best on the basis of all relevant reasons.” (Davidson 2001, p. 41). So, Davidson endorses a solution of akrasia of the second type (2), which explains the phenomenon as a failure of rationality.

Nevertheless, it is worth taking a closer look at the cases which get excluded from Davidson's account of akrasia on the grounds that they represent a loss of control due to a coercive force acting on the agent. Davidson's main objective in excluding such cases is to detach the discussion of akrasia from moral philosophy and to focus on the problem as an action theoretical phenomenon first and foremost (s. Davidson 2001, p. 30). I agree that a morally neutral discourse about akrasia is helping us zoom in on aspects of the problem which otherwise might get overlooked. However, this also creates tension between the cases of akrasia Davidson defines as genuine – i.e. the cases where an agent acts irrationally in contradicting the principle of continence – and cases where a hint of compulsion or loss of control might be present after all.

Perhaps it is evident that there is a considerable range of actions, similar to incontinent actions in one respect or another, where we may speak of self-deception, insincerity, *mauvaise foi*, hypocrisy, unconscious desires, motives and intentions, and so on. There is in fact a very great

⁸ It is still important whether *q-ing* in the coercive situation is considered intentional and if so in what sense of the term intentional. Perhaps, *q-ing* is goal-directed and therefore intentional, or maybe the agent is forced to form the intention to *q* before *q-ing* albeit not in the right causal way, since this intention does not arise from the personal (internal) preferences of the agent herself. For a discussion see Williams & Harrison (1981).

⁹ For a discussion see Stroud & Svirsky (2021)

temptation, in working on this subject, to play the amateur psychologist.. (Davidson 2001, p. 28)

By bracketing out actions tainted by such “shadow-zones” of agency, as he refers to them, Davidson turns his back on a potential solution to the problem of akrasia (Davidson 2001, p. 29). The way his account is developed, a gap is wedged between cases of akrasia, where the agent indeed lost control of himself, due to strong emotion, and the cool-headed succumbing to temptation described by Austin in his famous example:

I am very partial to ice cream, and a bombe is served divided into segments corresponding one to one with persons at High Table: I am tempted to help myself to two segments and do, thus succumbing to temptation and even conceivably (but why necessarily?) going against my principles. But do I lose control of myself? Do I raven, do I snatch the morsels from the dish and wolf them down, impervious to the consternation of my colleagues? Not a bit of it. (Austin 1956 - 1957 p. 24)

There is an argument to be made that if Davidson had indeed played the amateur psychologist, he might have stumbled upon a solution to the problem of akrasia equally detached from the particular doctrines of moral philosophers, whilst at the same time allowing for a more close-to-action understanding of what is going on in akrasia. Such a solution relies on the concept of habit, which unfortunately Davidson neglected because it would have introduced an element of compulsiveness into his theory.

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In the next subsection of this chapter, I will be presenting an alternative solution to the puzzle of akrasia, which to some extent still aligns with the main postulates of The Standard Story and other DAM theories – that actions are primarily produced by rational processes. This is Holton's account of the difference between akrasia and weakness of will. After presenting the account, I provide my reasons for believing that what Holton calls weakness of will is nevertheless reducible to Davidsonian style akrasia.

Of importance for my purposes, however, is the fact that Holton considers the role of habits in his explanation of weakness of will. Although the implied definition of habits in Holton's account is rather limited, it still helps us extend the debate about akrasia towards territories beyond the Standard Story of Agency. This helps me set the stage for my minimal solution to the challenge of akrasia, which makes use of an updated version of the concept of habit.

1.4. Holton: Isn't akrasia different from weakness of will?

Richard Holton famously noted that when we speak of akrasia we oftentimes have something else in mind, namely a short-term change of mind before we act. Such change of mind, or reconsideration is at the core of what Holton calls weakness of will (s. Holton 1999, p. 247). For Holton, there is a distinction between akrasia and weakness of will. In cases of akrasia we have a contradiction of a better judgment, but what Holton wants to show us is that in cases of weakness of will, we rather have a failure to stick to an intention. The agent's judgment might not be contradicted, rather what explains the action not mapping onto this judgment is the reconsideration of it in a situation where a reconsideration should not have taken place. (S. Holton 1999, p. 247)

Holton follows Bratman when he observes that often times our future-directed intentions have the form of a policy that should help us stay on track if for some reason we do not feel very motivated to stick to our plans (s. Holton 1999, p. 244). Intentions need to serve this purpose, because of the limited capacities for processing information and reasoning we have as humans. When we form intentions we define the parameters not only of the future action but also of the actions which need to be performed for this future action to be enabled. (S. Holton 1999, p. 244)

Our future-directed intentions could anticipate our weakness at a later time of action and include it as a clause in their content. For example, I might intend to go running in the morning, which is something I am usually resistant towards. Because I know that I might feel such resistance, Holton says that I form a more specific intention, called a resolution, which includes the factors of resistance in its content. In Holton's terminology, a resolution is a "contrary inclination defeating" intention (s. Holton 1999, p. 250). That is an intention that aims to defeat inclinations to act contrary to what one has planned.

Such a resolution might take the form of: "I intend to go running in the morning even though I would rather stay in my bed and scroll on social media.". Now with my resolution in mind, when the time to act comes I should be prepared to resist the urge to stay in bed and check social media. In theory, the intention should serve the function of motivating my running and at the same time preventing me from doing something else explicitly stated in its condition.

In Holton's framework a case of weakness of will occurs when given my intention and especially given my resistance tracking resolution to do x , I still succumb to the said resistance,

by reconsidering my intention to *x* when the time to act on it comes. In the example above, when morning comes and I am in bed and can either go running as I intended or scroll on social media – which I explicitly planned *not to do* – I end up scrolling on social media. For Holton, the reconsideration of my resolution in this situation is not called for and is therefore irrational of me to have reconsidered, especially given the fact that I planned against certain pressures which will be present at the time of action, i.e. my willingness to distract myself on social media (s. Holton 1999, p. 247).

By distinguishing between *akrasia* and weakness of will Holton points out that in the cases of weakness of will the agent is still acting on an intention, which came to light out of a uncalled for reconsideration. This makes the performed action not less intentional but rather points to the fact that there has been a reconsideration between the formation of the initial intention/resolution and the final execution of the action. Holton is therefore not denying the existence of *akrasia* or reducing it to weakness of will. His claim is that unless there has been an uncalled-for reconsideration of an intention *akratic* cases are not cases of weakness of will (s. Holton 1999, p. 255).

With the introduction of the element of reconsideration, Holton shows us how we can approach cases of *akrasia* differently from cases of weakness of will, thus distancing ourselves from the debate about the agent's better judgment and its contradiction. Central to this is the explanation of how the reconsideration involved in weakness of will takes place in the first place. Here Holton turns to an *out-of-habit* explanation. By doing so, he is using the concept of habit as a shorthand for unreflective, automatic behavior, and tries to provide a habit explanation, which aims at showing that the reconsideration was not a full-blooded action of the agent.

Holton defines a habit roughly as a tendency to *x* and he claims that the reconsideration of an intention is brought about by a habit, i.e. a tendency to reconsider: “Indeed, very often I do not even consider when to reconsider. I simply have *unreflective habits* that determine when to reconsider and when not to.” (Holton 2009, p. 8; [my emphasis]). I take this as evidence that Holton uses the notion of habit here in line with a common definition that equates habits with purely automatic, unintelligent, and reflex-like repetitions of behavior. This is because he claims on the one hand that it is irrational of the agent to reconsider and on the other that the reconsideration happens out of habit, thereby strongly linking habits with irrationality¹⁰.

¹⁰In an important fashion, the introduction of reconsideration as a habitual process also opens up the possibility to see how our habits, if defined less narrow-mindedly, could play a bottom-up role in our decision-making and in

If habits were not understood as mindless in Holton's account, his argument that weakness of will is strictly different from akrasia does not hold. This is because we can take Holton to have just introduced another action which itself could be seen as an intentional action against a better judgment – i.e. the action of reconsidering. Unless reconsidering is somewhat beyond the scope of intentional agency we find ourselves in a similar situation as in typical cases of akrasia. In the above example, the agent prefers to go for a run instead of scrolling on social media in the morning but ends up scrolling on social media. But we can also express this difference by saying that the agent had a preference for following his intention instead of reconsidering it but ended up reconsidering it.

This reconsideration can be seen as a form of intentional action against a better judgment, which is the defining feature of akrasia in the Davidsonian sense. Therefore, Holton's notion of weakness of will can be seen as a specific kind of akrasia, where the source of the contradiction is a reconsideration that is not in line with the agent's considered judgment.

This is why Holton maintains that reconsideration is a habit. Holton believes he has blocked this path of reducing weakness of will to akrasia by claiming that the reconsideration was done out of habit, which is to be understood in contrast to it being an intentional action. This puts habits in a central place in Holton's account of the distinction between weakness of will and akrasia. But ultimately they could prove to be the account's weak link.

Although Holton does not provide a clear definition of the term habit, it is clear from the way he is using it that he is aiming at contrasting actions done out of habit from actions done intentionally. So, it seems that Holton is endorsing a view of habits as unintelligent, automatic repetitions of certain behaviors. If such a conception of habit were to be refuted, then there is not a very strong case to be made for distinguishing akrasia from cases of reconsidered prior intentions. This is because nothing will stand in the way of describing the reconsideration of an intention as an intentional action be it one motivated by habit.

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In the next chapter, I aim to explore the historic grounds for the definition of habits as mindless, automatic, repetitive behaviors. I will provide arguments against the claim that habits are primarily to be understood in such a fashion by contrasting Gilbert Ryle's definition of single-track dispositions with more recent approaches toward a properly represented concept of habit.

identifying salient action opportunities within the situation in which we find ourselves acting. I will be pursuing and building on such a line of thinking in the second chapter of this thesis.

This set the stage to proceed further with my claim that some cases of akrasia are best understood as a result of habitual action, where habits are taken to be a legitimate source of intentional action and do not raise alarms about the agent being compelled in a freedom-robbing fashion by them.

Chapter 2

A Minimal Habit-Based Solution to Akrasia

Introduction

As we saw in the previous chapter the solutions to the problem of akrasia discussed either neglect the possibility of habits playing a role in the phenomenon due to worries about compulsion (Davidson), or the role of habits in the phenomenon is taken to be the foundation of what makes akratic action irrational (Holton). I disagree with Davidson that it is necessary to avoid any degree of compulsion to successfully identify and explain cases of akrasia. And I strongly disagree with Holton's implied definition of habits as mindless to the extent that they can serve as a sufficient condition for an action to be deemed irrational.

In this chapter, it is my aim to clear out some misconceptions about habits. I start by taking a stab at Ryle's definition of habits as mindless single-track dispositions and argue that there are good grounds to revise such a view despite its widespread popularity. My argument relies on the premise that habits are automatic to a degree and tied to specific contextual cues, which make their performance more efficient, without this impeding their adaptability to contextual changes and, most importantly, without them losing their intentionality.

Building on this refined view of habits, I continue to present how certain cases of akrasia could be properly accounted for by recognizing the role of the agent's habits in them. This is what I call the minimal solution to akrasia. It is minimal because it appears to work only for a narrow range of cases, where an agent has an established habit which, when they act upon, contradicts their deliberative judgment that an alternative action is better.

2.1. What are Habits?

Habits are widely regarded as couplings of stimuli with responses. As Wood and R  nger put it, habits are "dispositions to produce a certain well-practiced behavior in the presence of familiar cues associated with that behavior" (Wood & R  nger, 2016). Although this feature of habits is certainly important for the phenomenon, defining habits solely in such terms limits its scope

only to reflex-like actions acquired through repetition. I believe that a habit, however, is more than just the practiced execution of a basic bodily movement.

There is adaptability to the habits we enact. “[Habits] display the agent’s ability to behave appropriately in a narrow range of varying but familiar contexts, often in goal-directed ways, and revealing some sort of learning acquired through experience.” (Bermudez 2021, my emphasis). In a sense a habit is never given in permanence, it is in constant flux, changing as agents adapt to the contexts and situations they inhabit. Although the term ‘habit’ can literally be translated as ‘something one has’, the possession of a habitual feature or disposition is not immutable. On the contrary, as agents we mold to the agential contexts, we find ourselves in by virtue of our capacity to form habits.

This becomes apparent when we take a closer look at the operative level of habits. What we call a habit involves but cannot be reduced to a concrete action ϕ performed at t , by an agent A . In addition, a habit is also constituted by the history of performing ϕ , because this history gives additional information about the strength of the habit. Last but not least, a habit is morphed with a specific context, which calls for the ϕ -ing.

Just as we cannot enter the same river twice, we are never twice in the same situation. In this sense, every situation we find ourselves in is unique and unrepeatable. Nevertheless, on the level most agents operate the uniqueness of each situation is not fully realized, leading us to equate situations based on the features they share. What this implicates about habits is that they help us equate one situation to another as long as the difference between the two is within some margin of distinction.

The following example from Bermudez illustrates this point clearly:

“[When we pick up a coffee mug] we need not think about the cup’s precise position, the strength of our grip or the arm’s movement from table to mouth—these issues are sorted out automatically, but every time slightly differently, as the habitual action adapts to each particular circumstance.” (Bermudez 2021)

The habit allows for the seamless picking up of the coffee cup in various “normal” situations – I pick up my clay mug from the table just as easily as I pick up the paper cup from the kitchen counter, and do so out of habit, as long as certain features of the situation (e.g. cup and flat surface) remain stable within appropriate limits. My habit would get disrupted if I had to pick up (or rather grasp) a coffee cup in zero gravity, or if the cup was the size of an outdoor plant pot.

When we conceive of habits in their entirety, it becomes clear that an agent is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a habit. As an agent, I am not carrying my habits around waiting to encounter situations where they become my go-to coping mechanisms. Rather I exist as an agent through the way my actions are mediated by my habits to interact with the environment. This underscores another important element, namely that my habits are actively contributing to the sense of self that I develop from my agency.

Armed with this specific understanding of habits as automatic, but also intelligent and adaptive in the next subsection I aim to clear out some misconceptions about the term, namely that due to the improved efficiency of action facilitated by having a habit associated with it, agents are acting unintentionally when they act out of habit. I aim to show that goal-directed action and habitual action are interconnected. This opens the door for a view of habitual action as intentional by virtue of this relation to goal-directed action. With these background conditions, I further proceed to argue that habits can help us explain cases of *akrasia*.

2.2. Misconceptions about Habits

Here I want to compare two definitions of ‘habit’ which are very different but which also get often conflated. The first definition takes habits to be unintentional, automatic, rigid, and mechanical. This definition originates from Gilbert Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind*, where Ryle took habits to be single-track dispositions obtained from rote repetitions of learned responses, or what he designates as “drilling”. He writes that “when we describe someone as doing something by pure or blind habit, we mean that he does it automatically and without having to mind what he is doing. He does not exercise care, vigilance, or criticism” (Ryle 2009, p. 42). Such a view disqualifies habits from being the right candidate for intentional action. It is difficult to see even, how actions produced out of habit, so understood, differ from mere behavior.

The second definition of habits is of psychological origin and relates to Ryle’s in a few important aspects: the automaticity of the performance of the habitualized actions, the efficiency of habitualized actions, and the freed-up cognitive resources when performing a habitual action. However, this second approach also allows for some more nuance regarding the intentionality status of habitual actions. According to this second definition “habits are dispositions to produce a certain well-practiced behavior in the presence of familiar cues associated with that behavior” (Bermudez 2021, p. 587). Although it could be easily amended

to this definition that habits are unintelligent in virtue of their automaticity, the door has not yet been explicitly closed to rescue the agential status of habits so defined.

New psychological research recognizes automaticity as a scalar rather than as a binary concept which allows for different levels of automaticity to be attributed to a greater or lesser extent to different types of behaviors (s. Moors and De Houwer 2006). Even if some notable examples of what people tend to designate as habitual are certainly leaning more towards the fully-automatic extreme on the scale of automaticity, still many of the habits we can have are automatic only to a lesser degree. Further, our habits are not devoid of intentionality because they tend to successfully interact with other less controversial sources of intentional action such as deliberate goal pursuit (s. Wood and R  nger 2016).

Even when habits are defined as goal-independent behavior this is not to say that habits are a type of respondent behavior, i.e. behavior never under the influence of a goal (s. De Houwer, 2019), but rather that habits don't need to be aligned with presently held intentions in order to motivate behavior (s. Wood and Neal, 2007). Nothing in the second definition prevents us from seeing habits as intelligent or flexible, because even though they are responsive to particular environmental cues, they still adjust to contextual differences within degrees of contextual similarity.

It is obvious that no two situations are the same, therefore to generalize a cue out of some form of repetitive exposure to an environment is always going to rely on some misrepresentation (caused by abstraction) of the situation. In the first definition above (Ryle's), we cannot say the same. Here repetition is taken to mean ultimate identity – where it is possible to repeat one “action” twice. Ryle wants to use the term habit only for such instances of acquired ability, where the ability is fairly simple and, so Ryle, it is devoid of intelligence. He contrasts this with intelligent dispositions such as skills, which he takes to include the adaptability to subtle changes in our agential situations (s. Ryle 2009, p. 40).

Ryle failed to realize that this strict distinction between automatic habits on the one side and intelligent skills on the other does not hold. When he took automaticity to be the distinctive feature of habits from skills, he failed to see how much our skillful actions are also automatic albeit adaptive to changing factors in the environment. Ryle based his intuition on the observation that when performing habitual actions agents do not aim at improving themselves, whereas when they act skillfully the action gets adjusted in an adaptive manner to the new agential situation. “It is of the essence of intelligent practices that one performance is modified by its predecessors. The agent is still learning” (Ryle 2009, p. 42). It can be the case that not in

every instance of acting out of habit one has the particular aim to improve in the task at hand, but still habits are the underlying features of skills and many times the improvement in our skills cannot come without improvement in our habits.

What Ryle didn't see is that even in the habitual act of walking on pavements, which he takes to be an instance of mindless habit, we have the same adaptability to the environment as in the case of the mountaineer walking on ice and adjusting each and every step he takes along the way (s. Ryle 2009, p. 42). We are ready as we walk to sidestep puddles, avoid other people, evade suddenly opening car doors, and so on. Granted, such specific adjustments are not needed in a lot of the instances when we are walking on the street, but still this is no proof that once they are needed we are unable to perform them, just as the mountaineer is ready for the emergencies he is anticipating to encounter (s. Ryle 2009, p. 42).

In this sense, the wedge between habitual action and skillful action that Ryle is trying to drive does not really make sense. It is perhaps a form of vanity that people put on pedestals excellence in some realms such as musical performance, or peak athletic performance, and at the same time forget the grandeur of the most basic of acts such as walking down the street, picking up a cup off a table, or putting on clothes. In each of these actions, there are habits at play that allow us to perform the actions efficiently in a sequence, in varying but familiar contexts.

With this in mind, we can turn to the second definition I have presented here. It still puts habits in a rather behavioristic light, where in focus is the cueing of a trained response. However, using this definition we do not need to extend our thinking about habits to the territory where habitual actions are reduced to mere behaviors, or where they are first and foremost characterized as unintelligent. This is because of the relation between habits and goals psychologists have now come to identify.

There are at least 3 ways habits and deliberate goal pursuit interact:

First, habits form as people pursue goals by repeating the same responses in a given context. Second, [...] habits and deliberate goal pursuit guide actions synergistically, although habits are the efficient, default mode of response. Third, people tend to infer from the frequency of habit performance that the behavior must have been intended. (Wood and R  nger 2016, p. 289)

The first form of interaction, or rather meshing of habits and goals appears to be due to the fact that oftentimes we are acting in the same contexts – at home, in the gym, in the office, etc. This contextual stability allows for habits to form with regard to what we want to do, such that they make the activities we aim to perform in the specific context more accessible. As it became

evident during the 2021 pandemic, people did not realize how much the office helped them work, the library help them learn, and the gym helped them train until they were in lockdown and had to do all of those things at home.

In a typical setting, my goal to learn is supplemented by my habits to sit in a particular way at the desk, my habit to type on a keyboard, and my usual way of setting up the documents I am looking at, more specifically my habit of opening only a certain amount of tabs and of highlighting just like the way I always do, and so on. These habits of mine facilitate the action of learning, even if we assume it began in a typical action theoretical fashion let's say by me deliberating about what to do, perhaps saying to myself "You have to go and learn now", and then out of this intention actually getting down to learning by performing the correct bodily movements associated with this.

In this example, my learning habits get activated in the appropriate context, but still, they are intentional by virtue of the robust deliberative process that happened beforehand. In a sense, the intentionality of these habits is derivative from the intentionality of the whole action of learning.¹¹ This example is also pertaining to the second way active goal pursuit and habits can guide habits synergetically. There is a give-and-go between the system of deliberation, which sets goals, and the habitual performance of actions associated with the means for the achievement of a particular goal. This speaks against the notion that habits are independent action controllers at the expense of goal-directed actions (s. Wood and R  nger 2016, p. 298).

The third form of interaction between habits and active goal pursuit is when people infer from their habitual actions that they must have had the goal this action was aiming at or that they currently have the goal the habitual action was aiming at. This is informative of the bottom-up influence of habits on goals and goal-related actions (s. Wood and R  nger 2016, p. 303). Recognition of this interaction is typically overlooked in the Standard Story of Agency. The idea is that I can arrive at a goal by observing what I have been doing habitually.

This opens up a series of interesting questions about the status of this goal. For example, was it revealed by the habitual action, as a discovery that I had this goal without realizing it? Or perhaps the habitual action was independent of any goals before the agent inferred that there must have been a goal and thus forms the goal? Out of the logic that every action happens for a reason, it is easy to see how a reason could be inferred here, even if there was strictly speaking

¹¹ I will be presenting arguments against such a view of agency in the next chapter, but for my purposes here we can at least temporarily assume The Standard Story setting.

no reason extending in a more robust propositional way beyond the reason for the habit to be enacted.

I will not be pursuing answers to these questions here although further research is definitely called for. What is important for me from this discussion is the recognition that habits and actions performed out of habit are not in the slightest separate from other sources of intentional action. Further, I would argue that habits are intentional, on the one hand in the derivative sense as being the carriers of intentional action top-down, i.e. when I assume that my action started with an intention to act so, and on the other when we factor in the intrinsic teleological structure that they have (s. Pollard 2006, p. 10). To clarify the second part, because the actions performed out of habit are directed towards a certain state of affairs, e.g. a particular route being taken to a destination, a basketball going through a hoop, or even an emotional state being provoked in a conversation partner – we can see that they have an intrinsic form of intentionality (s. Pollard 2006, p. 10).

2.3. Introducing the Minimal Solution

The minimal solution I propose here applies to cases of *akrasia*, where one can postulate the agent has a strong habit to do *q* which gets activated when he tries to act according to the preference for *r-ing*. The activation of the habit results in the agent *q-ing* rather than *r-ing* at *t*, which is a direct contradiction of his maintained preference for *r-ing*. Having the habit to *q* provides the necessary explanation for the contradiction of the preference, but still, several questions need to be addressed first for the solution to be valid.

Firstly, having a habit to *q* needs to be defined in a proper way. For the minimal solution to work two elements of a typical definition of habit have to be kept in mind: (1) habitual actions are automatic to a degree and (2) habitual actions are context specific. Secondly, it has to be shown that despite a habit's automaticity a habitual action is performed *intentionally out of habit*¹². If this was not the case then the solution would not work, but rather present a variation

¹² I am not claiming that any action which has been habitualized can also be performed intentionally (where intentionality is understood according to The Standard Story of agency), rather my claim is that the action produced by virtue of the agent's habit is intentional.

of the case of coercion, where the external force responsible for contradicting one's preference by acting against it is the force of habit.¹³

A case where the proposed solution can help us explain an instance of akrasia is the following one:

Alice does not like to wake up for work in the morning she prefers sleeping in rather than waking up when her alarm goes off, but she also prefers having a job to the prospect of not being able to pay her bills, so she always gets up in the morning, despite her preference not to. However, she has formed the habit of snoozing the alarm at least 2 times before she gets out of bed, which further complicates her waking up because instead of just waking up once she does so 2 additional times, which for a person who does not like waking up seems excessive. Alice is also free not to snooze her alarm and just get out of bed, and she is aware of this when she decides that the next morning she is not going to press the snooze button for a change. The morning comes, the alarm goes off and Alice presses the snooze button. Only minutes after, when the alarm rings for a second time does she recall her resolution not to press the snooze button, but goes on and presses it again anyways. When she is finally out of bed she is feeling as if she didn't sleep at all and regrets not getting up after the first alarm, but it is too late...

This and similar cases can be explained by the role of the habitualized action (in Alice's case: the action of pressing the snooze button). For an action to become habitualized one of the key components is repetition. Alice has been pressing the snooze button for a sufficient amount of time for it to become her go-to action whenever she hears her alarm. The hearing of the alarm in this example can be taken to serve as the cue that is most strongly associated with the action of snoozing. There might be further relevant cues, which are all part of the setting where the habitual action unfolds, e.g. the luring warmth of the bed and the coziness of being covered up with a fluffy blanket. Also, the particular ringtone of the alarm could be a particularly strong cue, as well as the position of the snooze button, be it a physical one or a digital one on a phone screen.

From an external observational perspective, as the one we are assuming here with regard to Alice's case, it is hard to know whether the habit of snoozing has one particular trigger or a

¹³ As we saw in Ryle 1949 it is not uncommon to define habits as mindless repetitions of past behaviors. Note here that the label of action cannot be applied to the form of agency that comes out of a habit so conceived, since under this definition habitual agency is completely mindless and is closer to reflexive behavior than to action. I am actively opposing such a conception of habits in this work.

bunch of them. We also know from psychological experiments that it is notoriously difficult to identify the particular cues that set off habitual actions¹⁴ (s. Mazar & Wood 2018, p. 21). Usually, even the agent herself won't have certainty about what element of her situation exactly triggers her habit. Arguably, habit cues should be of perceptual nature: things such as sounds, visually perceived information, smells, and also kinesthetic interoceptive 'feelings' regarding one's bodily position in space. Thoughts as well can serve as triggers for habitual actions although we do not perceive thought in the same manner as we perceive other stimuli.

Now let me try to address the elephant in the room, which is the claim that despite the habitual action's automaticity, it is nevertheless an example of intentional action. Besides the grounds for thinking habits intentional that I have considered already in the previous section, there are several further intuitions that point towards such an analysis of the action in Alice's case. Just to reiterate, habits are to be considered intentional because of the various ways that they interact with goal-directed pursuits – i.e. 1) as a means to facilitate goal pursuit in familiar contexts, 2) the shared guidance of action between habits and goal systems, and 3) as grounds for inferring a specific goal (s. Wood and R nger 2016, p. 289).

Additionally, we tend to equate intentional actions with actions for which an agent is responsible. Although this might not be the case for all intentional actions, or rather for all descriptions attributable to an intentional action it is still worth noting that the agent is held responsible for habitual actions in the general case. This is because, as Pollard has noticed, when we act out of habit we generally¹⁵ have the capacity to intervene in our action and modify it (s. Pollard 2006, p. 61).

If Alice arrived late to work because she overslept, she will be responsible even if the tardiness was caused by a habitual action. Such an example is also brought forth by Silver (2019) where a person notices that they are running late but due to their habitual tendencies take just as long to prepare for work as usual, rather than speed themselves up to leave on time (s. Silver 2019, p. 269). Silver describes this as a habitual weakness.

¹⁴ This is in line with the pragmatic theories of psychology which maintain that it is wrong to frame actions around the stimulus-response model. See Dewey (1922), and James (1890)

¹⁵ Cases of addiction, compulsion, or phobias are usually thought to disprove precisely this point that habitual actions are under intervention control. However, Pollard, argues that these could be viewed as extremes where control could indeed be lacking, but this is not enough evidence that a more typical case of habitual action is also outside of our control (s. Pollard 2006, p. 61). In fact, an agent can interrupt his habits pretty easily: just think about situations where one is walking and stops to check out something in a shop window, or just stops because of a whim. Nothing in the habit of walking prevents the stopping, although one might feel some inclination to continue, one is not compelled to walk on in the same way an alcoholic is compelled to drink.

If I was driving us to the movie theater and instead of going straight I turn right, which is my habitual way of navigating to my office, I will be responsible for the delay. Compare this to the cases where I do not know the way to the movie theater and do not plan extra time for navigational disturbances, such as missing an exit, or not being able to find a parking spot because I do not know the area well. In the second situation, I will still be responsible, however, it will not be dependent on my habit but rather on some mismanaged planning.

Using the notion of responsibility to support the claim that habitual actions are intentional might sound to some people like putting the cart in front of the horses since we usually derive the claims of responsibility from the notion of intentionality. However, in an intuitive sense, the flip side of the argument still works, because it shows us that the natural way of speaking about habitual actions is not assuming their inevitability. That is, when we tend to hold people responsible for their habitual actions and the effects they might have, we implicitly assume that they could have done otherwise, which suggests that on some level we recognize that habits are not as rigid as some definitions paint them to be (s. Pollard 2006, p. 61).

Were it not possible for a habit to be modified, we would not have any grounds to expect that I would have driven us to the movie theater at all in the situation where the road there is also in part my road to the office. If the visual cue of the intersection was rigidly connected with the response of turning right, and a habit was merely a rote repetition of this behavior, I would not be able to drive anywhere else but to the office if it implies going through this intersection.

A second intuition speaking in favor of the intentionality of habitual actions is that habits are goal-directed, in other words, they connect a current state with some end state and this end state is the goal of the habit. Of course, an end state is not an ultimate state (such as the heat death of the universe), it is an end state relative to the habit. The habit can be viewed as the process of moving from the current state to the end state by means of a particular action that has been fine-tuned to achieve the particular end state. If such a definition of habits holds then we have a teleological structure intrinsic to the habit, by virtue of which habitual action is intentional since it is directed at a particular end state. (S. Pollard 2006, p. 10)

This understanding can help us grasp the intentionality of habitual actions, but it is important to stress the fact that it would not require agents to have an intention qua mental state to pursue the end of their own habit. The example of Alice snoozing her alarm shows us precisely that an agent can have a very different intention at the time of action from the goal of the habit they enact. Alice intends not to snooze, but her habit is to snooze therefore she presses the button, intentionally (by virtue of the teleological structure of her habit), acting against her intention

qua mental state. In fact, in akratic examples where habit plays a role, the intention of the agent is often times diametrically opposed to the intention ‘contained’, or rather ‘preserved’ in the habit. Again, the intention not to snooze is the exact opposite of the intention to snooze.

In the previous section, I showed that the intentionality of a habit could also be derivative from its role in the hierarchy of intentional agency. In Alice’s example, it is hard to show that the intentionality of the habit is derivative of her goals or preferences. Precisely because the goals or preferences she holds are for the opposite of what she ends up doing. Were it the case that habitual action could only be intentional if they stood in an appropriate relation to the agent’s goals, then the minimal solution would not have worked.

It is not an uncommon response from the internalist’s camp to the problem of akrasia that it is only an illusory problem because what is actually going on in these situations is that the agent reveals his or her true preferences in light of a temptation (s. Stroud & Svirskey, 2021). It is clear that there is a temptation in Alice’s case – sleeping instead of waking up. The internalist might argue, that Alice snoozes perfectly intentionally in virtue of her evaluative judgment at the time of action in the morning, which is diametrically opposed to her judgment the night before, prior to the alarm ringing.

By asking this question we are not only questioning the proposed solution to akrasia but also in a sense questioning our very understanding of akrasia as intentionally acting against a better judgment. The problem now seems to be less the intentional contradiction of the judgment in action, but rather the appropriate timing of preference assessment before one acts. In other words, when should I judge what I prefer to do? It is clear that in different states of mind our judgments might look diametrically opposite.

If Alice contradicted yesterday’s decision made in a clear state of mind and acted out of habit in the morning, we might have a case of habitual akrasia. But if she simply re-evaluated her preferences in the morning and in her sleepy state judged sleeping in to be the better option, then she simply employed her habit of pressing the snooze button to reach her goal – no akrasia there.

This redescription bears some similarity to Holton’s account of weakness of will. If we insist that Alice’s preferences the night before constituted an intention, then her re-evaluation of preferences in the morning can be viewed as an uncalled-for reconsideration of that intention. The habit that I have referred to in the introduction of Alice’s case – her habit of snoozing, then

becomes just a means to an end. But given the structure of Holton's account, another habit becomes more theoretically interesting and that is her habit of reconsideration.

As I argued earlier, Holton insists that reconsideration is a habit mainly to distance it from intentional action. But given the arguments I have provided earlier, I wish to show that even the habit of reconsideration should be understood as intentional. This is because, like other habits, it has its teleological structure, which perhaps could be spelled out as reconsidering prior intentions with the aim to maximize immediate comfort or pleasure. Further, the habit of reconsideration is under the *intervention control* of Alice¹⁶. Last but not least, the habit of reconsideration might let Alice infer that she had some goal that endorsed her acting as she did – e.g. the goal to take good care of herself and not to sacrifice her sleep for the sake of her career.

If this is so, we can still apply the logic of the minimal solution to the case of the reconsidered intention by first reducing it to a case of akrasia. This can take the following shape: Alice forms the resolution now get out of bed when her alarm rings even though she might be tempted to press the snooze button because she judges this best to do. In the morning the alarm rings and Alice reconsiders her intention from before and presses the snooze button. Her act of reconsidering is intentional even though it is a habitual action. Therefore out of habit, she acts intentionally against her better judgment from the night before.

The way the minimal solution helps us escape the paradox of akrasia is by introducing an alternative source of intentionality – the intentionality of habits. To recall, the paradox of akrasia was the problem for internalist theories of action that on the one hand akratic action should be impossible, but on the other, it is too ubiquitous to just be ignored (s. Burch 2018, p. 940). By showing that intentional actions could be performed not solely out of deliberation, but also out of habit, some cases of akrasia become clearer. The limiting factor, why this solution seems not to be extendable to all cases of akrasia is the limit of what we are willing to judge as habitual.

¹⁶ Even if only a plausibly sounding speculation speaks for this, i.e. that Alice probably does not reconsider all of her intentions, I still take it to be the more likely scenario than Alice compulsively reconsidering every intention she forms.

2.4. The Limits of the Minimal Solution

An objection to the minimal solution that I have developed here might concern its minimal status. Someone might criticize the fact that it is minimal and therefore does not cover all cases of akrasia, because clearly not in every case it can be easily seen that an agent has a habit to perform the contradicting action in precisely these circumstances. In the last chapter of the thesis, I present a solution to this issue by arguing for the adoption of a different understanding of agency, which does not over-emphasize the role of deliberation in action as The Standard Story does.

In this section, I wish to present some akrasia cases which arguably cannot be explained by virtue of a strong habitual action involved. As an example, we could borrow from May and Holton (2012) the case of Christabel's Affair:

Christabel, a happily married Victorian lady, is tempted to start an extramarital affair with William, a man she has recently met. She knows it is likely to be disastrous. People are bound to find out, and it will ruin her marriage and her reputation. Moreover, she considers it morally wrong. So she thinks it's not the best option. Nevertheless, she is not moved by these considerations, and has planned to go ahead with it anyway. When the weekend comes, Christabel follows through with her plan: she sneaks out late at night, meets William, and they start an affair. (May and Holton 2012, p. 348)

In this case, it is hard to say that Christabel had a habit of having an affair whenever the opportunity arose. Of course, this does not mean that this could not have been the case, but it seems unlikely. Analyzing the situation as described from the point of view of The Standard Story, we notice that Christabel considers all reasons not to go through with the affair but nevertheless plans for going through with it and ultimately does so.

The possibility of this case has to be defended, for the analysis to deliver its verdict that Christabel acts irrationally. If we take Davidson's argument about why such cases are possible, we need to say that Christabel considered some relational factors in light of which going through with the affair is not preferable to not going through with it. These are her reputation, her marriage, and her moral attitude. These factors make up the set of "things considered" and out of this set her preference for not going through with the affair should have formed.

Given the description of the case, it remains unclear whether Christabel formed such a judgment or not. Her attitude is described in terms of "not being moved by such considerations", which

could mean that she does not form a preference for not going through with the affair, but simply continues to plan how to go through with the affair. It is also unknown whether she continues to evaluate the two options in light of other factors, such as her personal satisfaction, her attraction to William, her boredom with her marriage, etc.

Davidson's argument is that an *all-things-considered* judgment in favor or against a course of action is not an *all-out* decision in favor or against the said course of action, therefore Cristable is not in possession of full objective knowledge that not going through with the affair is *all-out* better. This opens up the possibility for her to act akratically, according to Davidson.

As established, the description of the case does not tell us – the third-person observers of the situation, neither what the *all-out* better course of action is, nor whether additional factors were considered. We can take the phrase “not being moved by such considerations” to mean that Christabel's evaluative judgment against the affair fails to motivate her action therefore she goes through with the affair. In doing so she acts irrationally because she fails to follow her evaluative judgment and therefore contradicts Davidson's principle of continence, which requires her to act according to what she judges best *all-things-considered* in effect treating the *all-things-considered* judgment as a proxy for an *all-out* judgment.

The result is that the agent acted irrationally and that her action is a form of defective action by virtue of her not applying her better judgment in practice. The Standard Story, therefore, forces us to dispose of the rationality of the agent when it comes to cases of akrasia. This is because, in The Standard Story of Agency, rationality is expressed in mentalistic terms. To be rational means to think logically and to act according to what your judgments dictate (s. Davidson 2001, p. 23). This would oppose some strands of our reasoning to what is rational and lead to disregarding some additional inputs into our decision-making processes such as our habits, feelings, hunches, and intuitions, on the grounds that they are not underlined by sound reasoning, and therefore are at best arational.

If we wish to gain a holistic understanding of agency, including all elements which go into it, we cannot have a theory that preferences thinking over everything else. We act not purely by virtue of our capacity to make plans, we act because there is no other way but to act and when we reflect on what we have done we can be puzzled by what we find. This is the beauty of agency! It surprises us and takes us beyond the things we know. It is a form of inspiration, a creative expression of life.

Focusing too much on rationality seems to mystify aspects of our agency and opens up problems that sprain the ranges of our rationalistic theories. Akrasia is an example. Were we not trying to reduce agency to a type of bonding to our theoretical axioms to act according to the thing we consider best to do, we would not have had a problem with akrasia. This is not to deny our capacity to act according to rules, however, this is only a specific manifestation of agency and is by no means exhaustive of the phenomenon.

If akrasia is a true challenge for The Standard Story, as I maintain it is, we need to fill out the vacuum in our explanatory framework with an alternative theory. This new theory should in the best scenarios explain as much as The Standard Story does already and hopefully also helps us understand akrasia in an unproblematic manner.

A clue for how we might do this lies in the concept of habit which I have been working on to show that it helps us understand akrasia without sacrificing the rationality of the agent. It is rational for the agent to form habits therefore it is also rational that the habits get executed in their appropriate situations. In cases of akrasia, the agent is stuck in a loop where a habit gets activated in a situation that accommodates the habit but which the agent wants to actively modify for himself. Therefore until the agent has successfully managed to modify the situation there will be a conflict between the habit and the desired outcome. Habit-change calls for a situational change.

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In the next chapter, I will introduce the pragmatic definition of habit, which originates with Willaim James and John Dewey. I aim at showing that with a definition of habit broadly construed, the problem of akrasia could be dealt with easily, but not without some changes in our theoretical understanding of agency. If we change the way we conceptualize our mind as a distinct entity from our bodies and recognize the interactive nature of the beings we are, we could get to a more fundamental understanding of agency based on the experience of interacting with a world full of meaning, which is always firstly common and only at a later stage individualized.

With this theoretical shift, we will be able to see that ultimately the problem of akrasia is reducible to a conflict of habits. In this new framework, rationality is defined as a habit and is viewed alongside other habits that we have adopted by living in our specific environments. In a conflict of habits, the stronger habit is the one leading with more success to some specific action, thus we can dispose of the flabbergasting element of akrasia. This puts habits on a

continuum and allows for differences in strength, which could perhaps be further studied with regard to the stability of the agential context which calls for these actions, and also to the amount of repetition put into acting accordingly in such particular situations. This might sound simple enough, but it is crucial also not to overlook that habits combine and mesh and out of these interactions the agential situation also arises with different modalities.

Chapter 3

Pragmatism and Habits

Introduction

Recently there has been a paradigmatic shift in the cognitive sciences dubbed the *pragmatic turn*. This shift concerns debates about the nature of cognition, the nature of mind, and more close to my purposes here debates about agency as an embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended (4E) phenomenon. This approach emphasizes the role of context, action, and social interaction in shaping cognitive processes. This has also inevitably led to a reconceptualization of the term habit, which is of central importance for the early pragmatists and establishes itself as a cornerstone in the recognition of agency as a 4E phenomenon. (S. Caruana & Testa 2020, 1)

In this chapter, my aim is to present a 4E-inspired approach towards agency, which advances The Standard Story of agency among others by more fully accounting for akrasia, but also by recognizing the proper role of situational and contextual factors for agency. This is accomplished by expanding the term habit, following in the footsteps of Willaim James and John Dewey. I start by introducing the pragmatists' definition of habit and continue exploring the implications of putting the notion of habit at the central place in a theory of agency.

One such implication is that cognitive processes such as deliberation and reasoning, typically assumed to be the paradigmatic source of intentionality, are redefined with acknowledgment of the fact that they too depend on certain habits agents have. This allows for placing these rational cognitive capacities alongside other capacities, rather than above them, resulting in a flat hierarchy on which these capacities can more meaningfully be compared and studied not as dominating each other but as complementing and extending each other.

2.1. The Concept of Habit in Pragmatist Philosophy

Pragmatism was a noteworthy philosophical movement from the latter half of the 19th century. Its central figures were C.S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Despite numerous differences in their positions, these first-wave pragmatist philosophers were unified around the

general idea of a philosophy that did not separate knowing the world from our agency in it (s. Legg & Hookway 2008). For my present purposes here I will mainly focus on the works of William James and John Dewey. In what follows I will be sketching the pragmatists' account of habit.

Willaim James' work was groundbreaking for the fields of philosophy and psychology. As a founding figure of pragmatism, James laid great importance on the empirical testability of philosophical ideas as well as on their utility – hence the term pragmatism, which even in everyday use conveys some of this meaning (s. Legg & Hookway 2008). For James and other pragmatists, the concept of habit plays a pivotal role, not merely as a form of repetitive behavior, but rather as essential means for knowing and acting in the world.

In *The Principles of Psychology* James dedicates a whole chapter on habits, which is considered to be “the official debut [of the notion of habit] in the history of psychology” (Caruana & Testa 2020, 4). From this work stems the famous quote that “habit is the enormous fly-wheel of society” (James 1984).¹⁷ The metaphor points to the resistance to change a habit can exhibit, but if read too literally, one could miss the nuance that besides the conservative role habits play in society, James was also advocating that they also exhibit certain plasticity and an intrinsic teleological structure (s. Caruana & Testa 2020, 4).

James approaches the question of what habits are and how they form as an empiricist, and then further extends his use of the concept to the realm of the social. Some of the examples of habits and their features James gives in *The Principles of Psychology* are borrowed from William Benjamin Carpenter, who maintained that behavior and thought are to a great extent unconscious, and Leon Dumont, who drew a parallel between habits and the operation of the laws of inanimate matter (s. Caruna & Testa 2020, 4). These thinkers inspired James' view of habits as a material manifestation of temporary equilibria in our nervous system, i.e. as the process of gradual change in neural structures induced by learning (s. James 1984 p. 64). Because of this, many recognize James' view as a distant forefather of the theory of brain plasticity (s. Caruana & Testa 2020, 4).

The following quote nicely illustrates James' naturalistic view:

¹⁷ A fly-wheel is a mechanic device (a wheel) used for storage of kinetic energy. The wheel is usually made of a heavy material and once brought into motion it is hard to stop it or slow it down, because it has a great moment of inertia.

The moment one tries to define what habit is, one is led to the fundamental properties of matter. The laws of Nature are nothing but the immutable habits which the different elementary sorts of matter follow in their actions and reactions upon each other. (James 1984 p. 64)

This comparison of natural laws to habits is more than metaphorical and speaks to the sense in which pragmatists viewed humans. For James, humans are “bundles of habit” (James, 1899) meaning that the fundamental properties of matter, which we observe in our habits, constitute the kind of beings we are. James writes: “I believe that we are subject to the law of habit in consequence of the fact that we have bodies.” (James 1899). Humans are not extra-natural subjects reflecting upon the world, but rather an organism that developed from nature and still is by virtue of their habits immersed symbiotically in their environment.

James’s view that humans are ‘bundles of habit’ extends beyond bodily actions strictly speaking. It is also a view of what makes up our moral character. For James, it is to be conceived in terms of “an organized set of habits of reaction” (James 1899). This view makes James popular among the 4E cognitive scientists today, who also argue that humans are integrated into their environment and that processes of cognition should be studied with particular attention to their integration within the environment (s. Newen et. al. 2018).

For the pragmatist view habits are not contained in individuals. It is not only the personal nervous system that is in possession of the information about what a person should do and how they should be reacting to the events happening in their lives and also how to act with regard to the aim and desires they wish to fulfill. As John Dewey put it, in the first place the concept of habit addresses not the problem of “how either individual or collective mind forms social groups and customs, but how different customs, established interacting arrangements, form and nurture different minds” (Dewey 1983, p. 56). The idea that we do not have individuals first and societies later is probably one of the most important insights of John Dewey’s pragmatism.

John Dewey had a significant interest in the role habits play in human experience and agency. In a similar fashion to William James, Dewey emphasized the importance of flexibility and adaptability of habits. He believed that we should not think of habits as fixed and rigid repetitions of behaviors, but rather as active means that constitute the way we relate to the world. Further, habits play the role of the carrier of cultural information and they stabilize certain social practices, which could best be modified by an appropriate adjustment of the social context.

James' key insight that humans are a "bundle of habits" points to a very important aspect of the pragmatists' view: that is that all of our habits interact with each other and produce as a result the particulars of our preferences, our reasoning, of our skills, and, more generally, of our character. This, however, is not the way James' writing was typically received (s. Caruana & Testa 2020, p. 7). James focused in his examples of habits mainly on skillful actions, which had the unintended consequence that the notion of habit seemed reserved only for such types of actions.

To remedy this, Dewey argued against the view of habits as "passive tools waiting to be called into action from without" (Dewey 1922, p. 24). Dewey urged us to see that habits do not exist in isolation from each other and that they are not limited to bodily skills:

Were it not for the continued operation of all habits in every act, no such thing as character could exist. There would be simply a bundle, an untied bundle at that, of isolated acts. Character is the interpenetration of habits. [...] Since environments overlap, since situations are continuous and those remote from one another contain like elements, a continuous modification of habits by one another is constantly going on. (Dewey 1922, p. 38)

What Dewey calls the interpenetration of habits is a very important property and a distinct feature of the habit conceptualization that the pragmatists endorsed. It ties to the observation that societies and their practices nourish the minds of individuals by providing them with specific contexts and specific habits. Habits are interdependent because of the temporal continuity of the situations we live through. From moment to moment, we are adjusting to the changing conditions both around us and within us and this adjustment is facilitated by our habits. In this sense, there is also continuity between the habits, where the completion of one habitual action turns into the starting condition of the following habitual action (s. James 1984, p. 70).

But interpenetration is not limited to the chain effect of habit activation. Habits are interpenetrated on another axis as well. To understand this we have to take a closer look at the notion of situatedness. A single situation could be described in different terms and out of different perspectives. Habits are our fine-tuned responses to the meaning we perceive from our interaction with the world. Depending on the way we frame things we will act out of certain habits instead of others. This speaks for a meshed view of habits as a bundle, which is alive and kicking and which is in constant flux to put out the most adequate response to the currently perceived situation.

All habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self. In any intelligible sense of the word will, they are will. They form our effective desires and they furnish us with our working capacities. They rule our thoughts, determining which shall appear and be strong and which shall pass from light into obscurity.” (Dewey 1922, p. 25)

Habits are not limited to individual skills and abilities, although they play an important role in our skillful agency too. As already mentioned Dewey explicitly argues against the “toolbox view” view of habits (s. Dewey 1922, p. 24). For Dewey our habits make up who we are – they define our character, and this necessarily includes faculties that tend to be left out of the discussion on habits, such as rationality, deliberation, even thinking, and wanting. This is observed especially when we consider our “bad” habits. So, Dewey:

A bad habit suggests an inherent tendency to action and also a hold, command over us. It makes us do things we are ashamed of, things which we tell ourselves we prefer not to do. It overrides our formal resolutions, our conscious decisions. When we are honest with ourselves we acknowledge that a habit has this power because it is so intimately a part of ourselves. *It has a hold upon us because we are the habit.* (Dewey 1922, p. 24 [my emphasis])

For Dewey, habits are active means which to my understanding refers to the special feature of habits to motivate actions. The example with the bad habit demonstrates our desire to distance ourselves from our actions that are not aligned with our goals. This is why we denounce the habit as something external and as something that “hijacks” our agency in this circumstance. This interpretation is wrong, according to Dewey. He does not let us off the hook even when we use this conceptual maneuver to distance ourselves from some of our actions. For Dewey the so-called “bad” habit is just as much a part of us as the habit that is conducive to the end we are pursuing (s. Dewey 1922, p. 24).

This latter point already helps us anticipate the involvement of habits in akrasia. Pragmatically speaking acting akratically (or against our better judgment) is not to be seen as some sort of defect of rationality. In the end, it is true that we do what we do by virtue of the habits we have developed and which have been instilled in us, but this is not a shorthand for disowning our actions.

Recognizing our habits as the constitutive parts of our character does not take away from the possibility that phenomenologically acting akratically might feel authentically alienating and as acting not out of “the higher self” that we like to adopt in normal circumstances. The possibility is still open that some of the habits, despite already being parts of us, are not parts that we would like to keep, or that we, as we reflect on our agency, would like to endorse.

According to Dewey, we can recognize our habits by reflection and we can take active measures towards changing them. For Dewey, this implies first and foremost engaging with our environment, so as to change it in such a manner that the negative consequences of the habit we have identified through reflection are avoided. Dewey denounces the idea that acting out of a “bad” habit is a failure to do the right thing. He explains the “bad” habit as having formed a habit that leads to an undesired result: “conditions have been formed for producing a bad result, and the bad result will occur as long as those conditions exist.” (Dewey 1922, p. 29). Crucially, the bad consequences are not brought about by failure to act right, but rather by creating demand for them.

To borrow an example, which Dewey discusses, if I am slouching when sitting, this is not a case of me failing to sit properly, but a case of the conditions of my sitting environment predisposing my unwanted slouching (s. Dewey 1922, p. 29). Recognizing this could help me adjust my environment, by buying a standing desk e.g., which would eliminate the conditions for slouching. This change in the environment will require that I develop the habit to work as I stand, replacing the one that has the “bad” consequences. In a similar fashion, I could also work to modify the environment to demand of me that I stop slouching by lifting the computer screen that I am working on so that I have to look up and not down when I am working.

If my habit of slouching while sitting was just a rote repetition of past behavior, changing it seems impossible. But the pragmatists demand that we see the possibility of change in our habitual agency and further grasp the intricate entanglement of our habits to the specific circumstances we operate in. “Bad habits can be subdued only by being utilized as elements in a new, more generous and comprehensive scheme of action, and good ones be preserved from rot only by similar use.” (Dewey 1922, p. 195). The last part of this quote referring to the “similar use” of good habits, speaks of Dewey’s understanding of the connection between repetition and habit strength, however, Dewey avoids the mistake of equating habits with mere repetition.

There is one more aspect of the pragmatists’ notion of habits which I briefly touched on already, without explicating it enough and that is the all-encompassing nature of habits. If our habits are the constituents of our character then they do not only manifest themselves in our overt agency. They are also an intrinsic part of our mental lives and our rationality. Dewey writes:

Ideas, thoughts of ends, are not spontaneously generated. There is no immaculate conception of meanings or purposes. Reason pure of all influence from prior habit is a fiction. But pure sensations out of which ideas can be framed apart from habit are equally fictitious. The

sensations and ideas which are the "stuff" of thought and purpose are alike affected by habits manifested in the acts which give rise to sensations and meanings. (Dewey 1922, p. 31)

The claim here is that pure reason is fiction and that objects usually conceived of as mental events or mental states are also subjugated to the mechanics of habits. Dewey writes of the ‘affect’ of habits, which could be understood on the one hand as some form of causal influence and on the other as a constitutive influence. I am inclined to think that Dewey was leaning more towards the second possibility because it was in the pragmatist spirit to try to understand phenomena in relation to their practical realization. Therefore strictly speaking there would be no separate mind doing some sort of agency guiding on top. The following quote speaks in favor of such a reading of Dewey:

Rationality, once more, is not a force to evoke against impulse and habit. It is the attainment of a working harmony among diverse desires. "Reason" as a noun signifies the happy cooperation of a multitude of dispositions, such as sympathy, curiosity, exploration, experimentation, frankness, pursuit—to follow things through—circumspection, to look about at the context, etc., etc. (Dewey 1922, p. 196)

If “reason” as a noun refers to the cooperation of different dispositions, it makes sense to conceive of “reasoning” as a verb in terms of a process that leads up to the harmonization of the said dispositions. Importantly, reasoning itself is also a disposition: “Reason, the rational attitude, is the disposition [resulting out of inquiry], not a ready-made antecedent which can be invoked at will and set into movement.” (Dewey 1922, p. 196). As dispositions, reason as well as reasoning are susceptible to change and adaptation and are tied to our impulses “to handle, move about, to hunt, to uncover, to mix things separated and divide things combined, to talk and to listen” (Dewey 1922, p. 196).

With these claims, Dewey breaks away from the Cartesian paradigm and makes a radical step towards conceptualizing rationality not above but alongside our agential habits. The origin of reason is sketched as a bottom-up process that begins with the impulses mentioned above. Out of these the dispositions to act in certain ways arise (e.g. to inquire, to experiment, and to make observations). Reasoning is also such an emergent disposition with a specific feature that it allows us to harmonize other dispositions (s. Dewey 1922, p. 196). This however, does not give reason a different constitution from the rest of the dispositions: i.e. it still needs to be cultivated, it is greatly influenced by environmental factors both intrapersonal and extrapersonal, it cannot operate separately from other dispositions, and it is not fixed but evolves over time.

2.2. Pragmatists on Habits: An Overview

To summarize, the early pragmatists were aiming to develop a philosophical framework that emphasized the testability of ideas and properly accounted for the empirical data that could be provided in support of claims about the nature of mind and human agency. A prevalent role in the pragmatist philosophy was reserved for the concept of habit. Pragmatists understood habits not as rote repetitions of learned behavior, but rather as constitutive elements of human character, realized in action. Habits are thus action-motivating, interconnected with other habits in a larger bundle or a network, and dependent on diverse background conditions – environmental, as well as socio-cultural. Habits further contribute to the efficiency of actions and are foundational for the development of skills, but they should not be limited to solely this function of theirs.

In what follows I will develop an account of *akrasia* based on the pragmatists' notion of habit, which in my opinion helps grasp the phenomenon better than the traditional theories of action have allowed. As I already showed in the first chapter of this thesis, habits can help us explain some cases of *akrasia* such as Alice's snoozing, where the agent has a habit to perform an action, which in this particular situation contradicts an intention.

What remained in this analysis of Alice's *akratic* situation was the privileged status of her intention to get up without snoozing her alarm. For the purposes of the minimal solution, it was enough to show that a habitual action is an intentional action that can contradict a deliberate intention. However, for the broader picture of agency, it is also worth asking what the status of Alice's deliberate intention was and whether some property intrinsic to intentions originating in deliberation grants them a priority over habitually acted upon intentions. Given the pragmatists' analysis of habits, I am motivated to say that the answer to these questions is negative and that deliberate intentions should not be considered superior to other intentions.

In the next chapter, I argue along the lines of Burch (2019) and Bromhall (2017) for an explanation of *akrasia* which demystifies the phenomenon and helps us grasp the agent's position in it better. By adopting *akrasia* as a case study to compare different approaches toward a theory of agency, I rule in favor of the pragmatist framework. Specific for it is that it does not privilege deliberation as the source of intentionality, but rather it views it alongside other habits an agent might have. This turns *akrasia* from an impossible puzzle to a fairly straightforward matter of one habit guiding an action instead of another.

Chapter 4

Pragmatic Habits and Akrasia

Introduction

As we saw in the previous chapter the pragmatists had a very broad understanding of the concept of habits. So much so that habits were considered at the core of all human practices. In this chapter, I will be developing an account of akrasia based to a great extent on the pragmatic understanding of habits and showing that the cases of akrasia typically discussed boil down to a conflict of habits where the stronger habit usually has the overhand. In doing so I will follow in the footsteps of Bromhall, who has developed an account of akrasia based on the notion of action we find in Willaim James, and Burch, who takes a more Heideggerian approach to the question of akrasia and explains it with the heavy use of the term “existential ability”¹⁸.

Bromhall’s account acknowledges that the psychological model James had is rather outdated and that a theory of akrasia reducible to habits would require some modernization. His proposal is to marry James’ pragmatism to the newer theoretical framework of dual-process theory, according to which cognition is explicable by a dual-system model, where System 1 is fast automatic and intuitive, and System 2 is slow, deliberative, and analytical (s. Bromhall 2017, p. 46). There are some clear obstacles to modernizing James in this way and in my opinion, it might also do some injustice to the pragmatist notion of the situatedness of cognition to assume a dual-process model. Therefore I would refrain from following Burch on this path. However, I find his conceptualization of akrasia using James’ terminology extremely helpful in order to grasp the phenomenon.

Burch’s more phenomenological approach to the question of akrasia bears a lot of similarities to the one of Bromhall with the additional emphasis on the notion of situatedness, which Burch introduces in his discussion of “existential abilities” (or EA’s for short). I argue that Burch’s account could also be read by substituting what he dubs existential abilities with the pragmatist notion of habit. The main point I wish to defend is that in an atomistic sense what Burch calls an EA is the same as the “bundle of habits” discussed by the pragmatists. This terminological transposition is allowed by a few key elements which both habits and EAs share, namely that

¹⁸ A translations of Heidegger’s *Seinskönnen* (s. Burch 2018, p. 949).

they represent specific ways in which an agent relates to his or her surroundings, and also that the habits and EAs alike constitute and maintain the sense of identity the agent has.

The main takeaway from this chapter is that akrasia is not a defect of rationality as some action-theorists have claimed but rather a phenomenon dependent on a multiplicity of situational factors which activate or inhibit a person's habits, which has the result that in some circumstances our habits of deliberation give way to well-established patterns of action a person has been enacting for longer and more frequently.

A key observation for the following discussion is that every time we do something we are acting out of habit. This does not imply that every time we act we are acting automatically, rigidly, or without thought. As I have been stressing throughout this thesis this is a misconception of habit. Rather, when I claim that everything we do is out of habit I mean that every action is being more and more habitualized with every repetition – this is a process we cannot turn off. Even when we do something uniquely novel, it is a manifestation of an action that could with repetition become more efficient, require less cognitive strain, and become more and more automatic (but not to the detriment of its intentionality). When I say that this is acting out of habit, it is to be understood in the case of the first-time action as a sprouting of a habit – a weak habit, which can be further deepened and developed with repetition.

Repetition requires exposure to the same sort of circumstance – i.e. entering situations that very strongly resemble the original situation where the action was first produced, and also repetition of the particular bodily movements of the action¹⁹. To stress this one more time, everything we do is out of habit. Even when we do something for the very first time. In this special case, our habit is very weak, but even when I have only just made my first step, or read my first page I am already forming my habits of walking and my habit of reading. Now armed with these preliminary considerations let us turn to the account of Bromhall where akrasia meets pragmatism!

¹⁹ Note here that I consider a certain mental maneuver from let's say a set of premises to a conclusion to also be a bodily movement in a broad sense.

3.1. Bromhall's Akrasia Account

Bromhall's account of akrasia is developed in his paper "Embodied Akrasia: James on Motivation and Weakness of Will". There he applies James' pragmatism to the problem of akrasia which is understood as "failing to act in accordance with what we take to be our reasons for acting" (Bromhall 2018, p. 27). Bromhall observes that James has not himself commented on the problem of akrasia, but nevertheless, out of his views on the topic of motivation and action, an account could be pieced together (s. Bromhall 2018, p. 30). The structure of this account then heavily relies on James' understanding of action and how it is motivated.

James distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary action, where the key element of differentiation is the presence or absence of an idea of what one is doing. This means that in an involuntary action, the agent does not have an idea of what he or she is doing. An example of an involuntary action would be a twitch. In a voluntary action the agent either chooses between different ideas (understood roughly as alternative paths of action), thus making the action wilful, or she has an idea of what to do, but the idea on its own is enough to cause the action deeming it ideo-motor. (S. James 1984, p. 347).

The wilful voluntary action is associated with a feeling of effort induced by the choice-demanding situation. According to James, "the feeling of effort is a by-product of our neurology and the effect that habituation has on the development of our brains over time" (Bromhall 2018, p. 33). Habit formation has an adaptive function "to facilitate more effective interaction between the organism and its environment" (Bromhall 2018, p. 33)

This adaptive function is fulfilled in two ways: 1) habituated action obtains strong motivational force just by virtue of it being habitual and regardless of the agent's wishes at the time of action; 2) habituated action inhibits other actions contrary to that habit. As a result, we don't feel effort when we act in accordance with our habits. On the other hand, we do experience effort when we i) act contrary to our habits and ii) when we are in a situation where we have not developed any habits yet. (S. Bromhall 2018, p. 33)

In the latter case, we do not act involuntarily, or instinctively according to James. He postulates that we have "general forms of discharge" (James 1984, p. 77), which could be thought of as general habits. They are not suited for the particular situation to the maximum extent but we rely on them when we don't have a more 'tailored' habit for the particular situation. (S. Bromhall 2018, p. 34)

To summarize briefly, James distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary action based on whether the agent has an idea of what they are doing. In the case of voluntary action, the agent either chooses between different ideas or already has an idea of what to do, which guides the action by means of habituation. The development of habits over time has an adaptive function, facilitating effective interaction between the organism and its environment. Habit formation leads to strong motivational force and inhibition of other actions contrary to the habit, resulting in a lack of effort when we act in accordance with our habits, but experiencing effort when we act contrary to them or in novel situations. This perceived effort becomes a good indicator for cases where akrasia could occur according to Bromhall (s. Bromhall 2018, p. 41)

Using the framework of action offered by James, Bromhall sets out to develop an account of akrasia as a pragmatic problem rather than a failure of rationality. Firstly, he disqualifies involuntary action as well as ideo-motor action as candidates for akrasia. In his view only what James calls wilful actions could lead to akratic situations, because of the need to select an action amongst a number of compelling candidates. Akrasia, therefore, is strongly associated with the feeling of effort involved in wilful action, and according to Bromhall consists in failing to resist a habitual action. (S. Bromhall 2018, p. 36).

According to Bromhall involuntary actions are excluded from akrasia because they are directly triggered by the environment and not by an idea. Well-formed habits, or ideo-motor voluntary action in James' terminology, would also be excluded from akrasia: "In ideo-motor action, an environmental stimulus prompts an idea of how to respond, and the mind acts unhesitantly on that idea. There is no decision, judgment, or any sort of fiat to act, but rather no resistance put up against the natural discharge of the idea into action" (Bromhall 2018, p. 35). For example, when we are effortlessly acting in familiar contexts where we both know what to do and have been doing it successfully for a while – going with the flow in a sense.

Bromhall limits akrasia to cases of volitional wilful action where there is a competition between alternative courses of action each of which has motivational force. This is phenomenologically felt as an effort to act. The effort is either to override an existing habit or to select the best set of general habits to use in a novel situation (where there are no settled habits yet). Akrasia arises because "choosing one course of action over another does not neutralize the motivational force of previous contenders" (Bromhall 2018, p. 36). This makes it possible that this contending motivation ultimately results in action, which is opposed to the selected one.

Here is worth mentioning once again that in this framework, even if we do not have an idea about what to do, we have imperfect general habits that we resort to, so when faced with a novel

situation the agent has to consider the motivational force of different ideas of what action could work in the particular situation, alongside the motivational potential of the general habits, which could roughly be applied to any situation.

If we were to zoom in on the choice situation for a second, the strongest motivators of action appear to be our habits but our evaluative judgments and intentions need to also have some motivational force. Bromhall, however, does not explain where this motivational force should come from. One candidate would be to extend the notion of the habitual to the realm of reasoning and decision-making altogether. Even though Bromhall does not go this far, he considers reasons for acting to be only one part of the motivational force of action alongside emotions, desires, and feelings. This is why he later claims that purely rational acting out of reason is an illusion in this pragmatic framework. (S. Bromhall 2018, p. 36)

Bromhall argues that “for James, akrasia is a situation in which an agent has attempted to act against his or her settled habits, but has failed in that attempt; the resulting action, which would always involve the agent falling back onto a habitual behavior, would be akratic.” (Bromhall 2018, p. 36). This claim shows along the lines of the minimal solution that I have presented in chapter one that in many circumstances the akratic action is in fact performed out of habit.

Bromhall's analysis of akrasia centers on the idea that it is a practical failure on the part of the agent to resist their habitual actions. Akratic actions, therefore, do not necessarily indicate irrationality, but rather a lack of success in facilitating the resistance to act out of a habit by means of environmental modification. In fact, Bromhall argues that an agent's actions are determined by the strongest motivational force. “While akratic action may look irrational or immoral *prima facie*, it instead merely shows that the agent has not reached the point where she can resist her habituated behavior in these circumstances.” (Bromhall 2018, p. 43).

The talk of resistance here points towards the element of effort briefly mentioned above. It requires effort to override our habits and when we fail to manage this feat, so Bromhall, we act akratically. The presence of effort in terms of cognitive strain to evaluate actions, is not a sufficient condition for akrasia, however. We can have a situation where the agent struggles to act against a habit and succeeds, which means that there was an effort (due to the struggle) but no akrasia because the habit was ultimately overridden.

Bromhall sees this account of akrasia as a meaningful appendage to James' melioristic view because they share the common theme that “we should make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy.” (James 1984 as cited in Bromhall 2018, p. 40). This implies that we are

not deterministically driven by our habits, but rather that we have the power to override them and even point them in a direction that we select. This notion supports my stance that the process of habituation is universal – i.e. regardless of the momentary valuation of an action by the agent it gets habitualized, and also more importantly every instance of acting presents a data point that could be referred to when we assess the strength of a habit to so act.

3.1.1. Critical Remarks

I take Bromhall's account to prove that using James' terminology and understanding of agency a consistent explanation of akrasia could be obtained, without sacrificing the rationality of the agent. This is not to say that this account does not need some refinement and modernization. Even Bromhall comments on the fact that much has changed since James wrote his *Principles of Psychology* and that these advances in the field should not be ignored in favor of an outdated model of agency (s. Bromhall 2018, p. 46). Nevertheless, there is some value in analyzing this model of akrasia and making use of the functional explanation of the phenomenon, even if some murky terms such as ideo-motor action and much of the neurology James uses require updating.

A clear gap in this model remains the source of the wilful decision to attempt to override an existing habit. It looks like some meta-cognitive evaluation process is required for this role to be fulfilled, which in its term requires an explanation of this reflective process either in terms of a rational faculty²⁰ of some sort or in terms of a reflective ability, which is also subjected to the same processes of habituation just as any other action.

My stance on this matter has been oozing throughout this thesis, but to say it directly, I am leaning towards the second option here, where making decisions is just another action that we habitualize and improve in with practice and clear feedback. This view is in an important sense non-dualistic because it does not presuppose a higher power of sorts tasked with controlling our bodies. Rather, in a much more organic way, our interactions with the world contribute to, and even constitute how we develop and proceed to interact with it. All episodes of our lives stack together to make us the particular selves we are in each moment, all experiences contribute to the developing of our habits in terms of patterns of agency, patterns of thinking, and patterns of relating to ourselves and to others.

²⁰ A Cartesian-like cogito comes to mind, or some notion of a will.

Inseparable from these habits is the situation, recurrent or not, which “installed” them in us as viable (or unviable) means toward ends. All pieces of information which we come to be exposed to are parts of this notion of a situation and the self as such is not something dropped in it from without but rather something which developed from within the situation and is in this sense inseparable from it. Arguably it should also be unthinkable without it, but a great deal of philosophical effort has been (and is being) put into abstracting as further away as possible from it.

In the next section, I will present Buch’s account of akrasia, which in a useful manner provides Bromhall’s view with some crucial updates aligned with my view on rationality and decision-making. My general line of argument is that the pragmatic sense of the term habits is what allows for its extended use in a theory of akrasia, which identifies deliberation as a skill, and not as a primary source of intentional action. To back up this claim, I draw parallels between Dewey’s definition of habit already discussed in Chapter 2, and the notion of “existential ability” (EA) introduced by Burch. With this adjustment, I arrive at a theory of akrasia, strongly influenced by Burch’s, which allows for the cases that would normally strain the minimal solution of akrasia I presented earlier to find an appropriate explanation.

3.2. Habits and Akrasia

Burch begins his paper *Making Sense of Akrasia* with a familiar culprit – the deliberative action model (DAM). To recall from Chapter 1, DAM identifies intentional action as an action done for a reason after a process of deliberation, which allows the agent to settle on a particular action from different alternatives. Burch argues that DAM fails to explain akrasia properly because it allows for only one source of intentional action – deliberation. This makes cases of akrasia particularly problematic because if intentional action is action according to a better judgment, there cannot be an *intentional* action that contradicts such a judgment. (S. Burch 2018, p. 240)

DAM falls in the category of an internalist theory of agency because the judgment about which action to perform happens inside the mind of the agent. In contrast, externalist theories of agency are also available, but Burch takes issue with these as well, because they sever the connection between the evaluative judgment of the agent and the performed action completely and see the action as brought about by a will, separate from the decision-making of the agent (s. Burch 2018, p. 240).

If there are different sources of intentional action, so Burch, these should not make the mistake of externalism and presuppose an independently functioning capacity – the will, which is responsible for some actions but not for all. Such an alternative source of intentional action should a) stand in the right relationship to our practical agency and b) should not mistify the link between judgment and action, as the notion of the will does. (S. Burch 2018, p. 240).

Burch identifies as an alternative source of intentional action – besides deliberation – SPIA, or skillful, pre-reflective, intentional action. For an action to be defined as skillful it has to fulfil the following requirements:

- 1) could be done spontaneously, without prior deliberation,
- 2) they are under our control and yet
- 3) sufficiently practiced to be partially automatic, and
- 4) they allow for fine-tuned adjustments on the fly in response to changes in the situation (Burch 2018, p. 944).

Further Burch would include in the skill category everyday actions in different stages of mastery (s. Burch 2018, p.944). In fact, it is not clear that there are actions that are not skills according to Burch. At this point I would like to interject that Burch's theory could benefit from using the term habit, understood in the pragmatic sense, rather than the term skill for the description of these actions, especially if he would be extending the set of what he calls skills to include everyday actions.

The way I see it, the category of habit includes skills since skills are made out of habits, but at the same time it is not limited to skills alone, which are typically associated with very niche actions. This might look like a purely terminological dispute based on different preferences to use one term instead of the other, but even so, talking of habits rather than skills, and especially habits understood as more than mere rote repetition, allows us to escape the view that these patterns of action are contained in the individual agent. When we talk about skills, we usually revert to this type of thinking, putting the agent at the center as a sort of bearer of the skill, as if it is solely up to the agent to act with it or out of it. Talk of habits on the other hand, properly understood, also emphasizes the situatedness of the action, so that it becomes more difficult to ignore the role of the overall agential context.

I believe that Burch is not far away from this view himself because of his claim that skills further depend on learning some “sensory-motor contingencies” as he calls them (s. Burch

2018, p. 951). Thinking of habits in terms of sensory-motor contingencies is a slippery slope that could pretty quickly land us in the realm of behaviorism, nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that habits do rely on such an associative form of learning, but are not limited to it. In other words, even though we could analyze a habit as a contingency of this type, we should also account for the contextual variance that allows the habit to adjust to similar but varying situations (s. Bermudez 2021, p. 558).

Just like habits for Dewey, as we saw earlier, are interpenetrating and thus bound together in a metaphorical bundle, Burch argues, following Heidegger, that skills are grouped together and organized in what he calls Existential Abilities (EA for short)²¹. An Existential Ability or an EA is a pragmatic normative context in which our skills find their relevance. Burch writes that “our EAs allow us to participate in the practices of the shared world—they allow us to adhere competently to and experiment with the norms of those practices, and to make sense of ourselves in terms of those practices.” (Burch 2018, p. 949). The EA enables our agency in the world, whilst simultaneously also figures as a constitutive element of ourselves. Put bluntly, we do what is appropriate given the norms of the EAs we’ve grown accustomed to, and what we do starts defining our identity (s. Burch 2018, p. 949).

Again the parallel to Dewey’s notion of character, which is made out of the habits that we develop and the Heideggerien idea that an Existential Ability in part constitutes our identities are striking. So much so that in my opinion these could perhaps be understood synonymously. Just to reiterate, Dewey also strongly connects character to the social contexts we operate in and the connecting link in this chain is the habits that the said contexts instill in us as we live and develop in them (s. Dewey 1922, p. 38). Comparing the Deweyan framework to Burch’s we can see that they are not so different.

In Burch’s framework, we have skills that compile into a normatively sensitive EA, with the caveat that these skills themselves are made out of sensory-motor contingencies. “Our EAs are what make us capable of SPIA: each EA is a skill (or a set of skills) that allows us to spontaneously and intelligently respond to the world in (at least roughly) the right way” (Burch 2018, p. 949). As an enabling condition of SPIA, which to recall stands for skillful, pre-reflective, intentional action, our EAs are of central importance for Burch’s account of akrasia.

²¹ Existential Ability is Burch’s preferred translation of the Heideggerien term “Seinskönnen”. (s. Burch 2018, p. 949)

It is worth spending some time on the relationship between SPIA and an EA, which, if I interpret Burch correctly, resembles the relation between a habit and a particular habitual action – i.e. an exercise of that habit. In Burch’s framework EAs and SPIA are very much entangled. This is because the intentionality of SPIA is granted only if the pre-reflective action is properly guided by an EA, both in terms of the agent having practical knowledge that she is exercising a particular EA and in terms of the sensitivity to the norms of the EA. (S. Burch 2018, p. 954)

Burch holds that the practical knowledge of the EA is obtained not by means of conscious reflection, but by the feedback that any given agential situation provides us with – “I don’t observe or self-consciously monitor my own intention but rather I know it non-observationally because it is mirrored back to me in contexts, things and others” (Burch 2018, p. 953). If we were to express this practical knowledge, according to Burch it should take the following form: ‘I am doing such-and-such for the sake of *this* EA’ (s. Burch 2018, p. 953)²².

Further, for an action to be pre-reflective but also intentional, Burch maintains that it should be properly sensitive to the norms upheld by the EA it is a part of (s. Burch 2018, p.954). This is to say that a pre-reflective action can be attributed to an agent as intentional if it arises from the agent’s norm-responsive handling of the situation. Such handling is deemed norm-responsive if, in a broad range of situations where there were enough relevant normative factors, the agent would have acted differently in a way that aligns with those factors. Burch contrasts this with an automatic response, which lacks such a norm sensitivity, arguing that without it the action cannot be deemed intentional. (S. Burch 2018, p. 954)

To summarize, in Burch’s framework, an action could be pre-reflective – i.e. not a product of deliberation, whilst at the same time being intentional, if it is properly related to the EA it is a part of. This implies that such an action tracks the norms of the EA and is flexible but not rigid if aspects of the situation would change these norms or the EA exercised. Further, it is guided by the agent’s practical knowledge of the EA, which in its own right is given non-observationally, but rather as a result of feedback offered by the agential situation. (S. Burch 2018, p. 952-954).

With this more precise understanding of the relationship between EAs and SPIA, we can now turn to one of the EAs particularly relevant for akrasia which is the EA of deliberation. Burch writes:

²² This is reminiscent of the psychological finding discussed in chapter 1, that we tend to derive some of our intentions from the frequency of our habitual actions (s. Wood and R nger 2016, p. 289).

In keeping with my Heideggerian approach, I don't conceive of deliberative judgment as an independent mental faculty or a raw computational power that evaluates my life, so to speak, 'sideways-on'; rather, (...) I understand deliberation as an existential ability or skill. (Burch 2018, p. 957)

Here perhaps it becomes clear how Burch's account could be an advancement of Bromhall's pragmatic account of akrasia that I presented in the previous section. There as you recall, the agent would experience effort from deliberating about which course of action to choose in situations where a habitual action was not readily available, or where the agent would like to override his or her established habitual action (s. Bromhall 2018, p. 33). The status of the deliberation or thinking associated with the evaluation of options to act was not clear in Bromhall's account. However, we can now assume with Burch that deliberation itself is an EA or a particular "bundle of habits", if we were to turn to Dewey's analysis.

This helps us see akrasia in a new light. Instead of assuming that intentional action arises or is caused by a privileged faculty of reason, we now put reasoning and acting in accordance with our EAs on the same plain. In fact, reasoning is also acting in accordance with an EA the origins of which are just as much social as the origins of all of our other EAs. Burch comments on the social aspect of deliberation by mentioning that it is a skill developed like any other within a certain context and governed by norms (s. Burch 2018, p. 957).

Similarly to Bromhall, Burch would also claim that we deliberate when we are facing a novel or difficult problem, but this would not grant the skill of deliberation any special status. Burch maintains that his view "does not construe deliberative problem solving as radically discontinuous with skilled action." (Burch 2018, p. 957). It is also important that even if the difficulty of the problem we're facing does not allow us to simply act using our already developed habits or skills, these do not get switched off for deliberation to take the stage. Instead, they are always actively searching for aspects of the situation similar enough to the conditions that the agent has already learned how to deal with (s. Bromhall 2018, p. 957).

This latter point also nicely aligns with Dewey's definition of habits as "active means", where the habits most fine-tuned to the current context in a sense are holding the rudder, but at any moment they could be substituted by a different habit or set of habits, depending on how the situation gets modified or changes (s. Dewey 1922, p. 26). I imagine it as a time continuum where a new situation arises out of the previous one and does so partially by chance and partially by the active efforts of the agents it "carries". The active participation of the agent could further

be by virtue of their already acquired knowledge of dealing with already familiar and well-recognizable aspects of the situation – i.e. by virtue of their habits.

Alternatively, agents can actively contribute to the continuous change of situations even when they are facing unfamiliar grounds and this requires an ability to problem-solve, which in its own right relies on habits of deliberation. Problematic situations after all have a common denominator that can be viewed as the instigator of the particular habits of deliberation and that is the lacking solution – the discontinuity of the familiar.

If we accept that deliberation is a habit or an EA, we are already in a position to see akrasia as a conflict of habits. Burch argues that akrasia occurs as a three-part process, where, 1) the agent's habitual acting is disrupted by a problem, which 2) demands that she deliberate and identify a viable solution, which solution then, 3) does not come to fruition because she exercises SPIA as part of another EA instead (s. Burch 2018, p. 959).

Based on this framework, Burch specifies three types of akrasia that are relevant for the discussion here: **synchronic**, where the agent deliberates and immediately acts out of an EA contrary to the resulting solution of the deliberation, **diachronic**, where the agent deliberates about what to do in a future moment and when the moment arrives identifies features of the situation which provoke SPIA contrary to the course of action identified in deliberation, and **ambivalent**, which he maintains is due to a deep ambivalence in our preferences for which our EA of deliberation does not account for, thus facilitating SPIA out of a different EA than the one endorsed by deliberation. (S. Burch 2018, p. 959).

The specificity in the case of synchronic akrasia is the timing of action after the deliberation has taken place. Burch presents the following situation:

Take Gina, a lawyer working on a brief for a major client. Running flat out to meet her commitments, Gina fears she won't finish on time. Then, in the midst of a stressful day, her partner Ella calls in need of emotional support, asking Gina for an hour of her time. Gina deliberates about what to do and judges that she ought to turn Ella down and finish the brief. Then – without revising that judgment – she goes to see Ella anyway. (Burch 2018, p. 960)

Applying the model above akrasia here is explained by Gina's action according to her EA as a supportive partner. But first, her currently exercised EA of a lawyer on a deadline was interrupted by Ella's call. This was the prompt for her deliberative EA to come into play and to judge – out of the current situation, that it would be best to turn Ella down. However, this judgment would get contradicted by the spontaneous action out of a different EA (s. Burch

2018, p. 960). Burch writes: “Gina’s action is an instance of [synchronic akrasia]: she deliberates and reaches a judgment about what to do, but at the same time her skillful responsiveness detects other normatively relevant features of the situation; [...] and then she engages in SPIA against her better judgment.” (Burch 2018, p. 960). It is important to notice here, that Gina does not come to a new decision, but rather acts out of a different EA, or put differently, out of a different habit which allows her to engage with the world and obtain a sense of herself.

Burch also introduces examples of diachronic and ambivalent akrasia, however, for the sake of continuity I will apply Burch’s framework to the examples of akrasia already discussed in chapter one. I think this will also help to show how akrasia can be explained in these cases which lay outside of the scope of the minimal solution introduced in Chapter 1.

Starting with Alice and her habit to press the snooze button instead of getting out of bed when her alarm rings, we can see this as an example of diachronic akrasia because there is a time gap between her deliberation about what to do and her action of pressing the snooze button. In this case, Alice’s EA of deliberation is prompted into action because of the miserable feeling she experiences after pressing the snooze button too many times. Then she deliberates and settles on a course of action that seems like a solution to the problem of how not to feel miserable – simply by not pressing the snooze button the next morning.

In a sense, she settles to approach the world using a new EA, which requires her to resist pressing the snooze button. In the morning, however, acting out of this new EA seems impossible because the situation in the morning has not changed much, which puts Alice in the context of her already well-practiced EA of postponing her start of the day by pressing the snooze button. The explanation of her akrasia is that her deliberation was not sensitive to some normative aspects of the future situation where the deliberated action would have to be implemented (s. Burch 2018, p. 959). Some of these normative aspects include the ease with which the snooze button can be pressed, the location of the alarm clock, the ability to recall the alternative action settled on by deliberation, etc.

It is worth mentioning here that there are many factors that contribute to the establishment of the EA of pressing the snooze button. An obvious one would be the existence of a snooze button in the first place. It can hardly be seen as a necessity that an alarm should be snoozeable, but historically we’ve come to design our alarm clocks in this fashion. Further, whether Alice gets enough good-quality sleep on average also plays into the history of her habit to snooze, and this depends on a further multitude of factors both biological and social. So, here we can precisely

see how entangled our habits are with each other, which presents a limit on our skill of deliberation to account for all possibly relevant factors for an adequate solution to be reached when a situation that needs modification arises.

We can also easily imagine the case where Alice manages to stick to her intention not to snooze, that is if she takes some further steps to facilitate this outcome. For example, if she puts the alarm further away from her bed and also goes to sleep an hour earlier. The first preliminary step would force her to do something else before she presses the snooze button – i.e. to go to her alarm and the second step would work towards her getting enough sleep so that she feels rested in the morning, which would make the snoozing unnecessary. This being said, there is still no guarantee that her already established habit would be sufficiently disrupted by these preliminary steps, so it still might come to the situation that she acts akratically. However, chances are that these steps might help more than just a decision to do otherwise would, because of the modification of the situation the preliminary steps include.

What Alice in effect has to do is strengthen her habit of “not-snoozing”. This is not to be understood in negative terms solely, although “not-snoozing” is also a proper description of the habit. The habit of “not-snoozing” is rather the habit of “doing something else different than snoozing”. This equation is powered by the somewhat platitudinous observation that we cannot not act. So, Alice will have to practice the habit of doing something else instead of snoozing in order to modify her morning routine.

This last observation is consistent with Burch’s interpretation of the case of the recent but determined non-smoker, who meets his old smoker friend and ends up smoking, despite all of his good reasons against it (s. Burch 2018, p. 261). Burch writes in his phenomenological terminology that refraining from smoking comprises a new EA for his agent: “By quitting, Black has acquired another EA, namely, the ability to abstain from smoking. This is a practical skill, which, among other things, involves avoiding triggers, shifting his attention away from temptations [...]” (Burch 2018, p. 962). Here again, we can see the parallel between an EA and a bundle of habits. In my opinion, it goes so far as for the concepts to be almost interchangeable. Again this ability or habit of abstinence is not given presented as not smoking – although this is what it implies, but rather in terms of the actions one has to do to obtain this ability.

These two examples of diachronic akrasia endorse Burch’s view that ultimately akrasia boils down to the exercising of the habit or EA sufficiently practiced in a situation where the habit or EA of deliberation provides a different solution. I maintain that being open to the use of the pragmatist’s definition of habit synonymously with what Burch calls existential abilities (EAs)

helps us on the one hand overcome the rigidity that has been associated with the term habit, as well as provides a bridge between two areas of philosophy, which could function rather complimentary – phenomenology and pragmatism.

The next case, I would like to discuss is Christabell's affair, which as we saw in the first chapter was not explicable by reference to habits, understood as purely automatic repetitions of past behavior. But now, using Bruch's framework, we can see, how the case could be viewed as a case of ambivalent akrasia. The case looked as follows:

Christabel, a happily married Victorian lady, is tempted to start an extramarital affair with William, a man she has recently met. She knows it is likely to be disastrous. People are bound to find out, and it will ruin her marriage and her reputation. Moreover, she considers it morally wrong. So she thinks it's not the best option. Nevertheless, she is not moved by these considerations, and has planned to go ahead with it anyway. When the weekend comes, Christabel follows through with her plan: she sneaks out late at night, meets William, and they start an affair. (May and Holton 2012, p. 348)

For a case to be one of ambivalent akrasia, the agent has to be deeply ambivalent about the course of action he or she prefers. If we take a closer look, here we have again the same structure of an EA getting disrupted by an event – Christabel's temptation to start an affair with William, which prompts the EA of deliberation. Christabel then comes to view the affair as the inferior option, because she deliberates out of her EA as a prudent married lady. When she then plans and goes through with the affair, however, she acts spontaneously out of a different EA, towards the strength of which she was ambivalent in her process of deliberation. It could be that the affair provided her with the opportunity to rebel against the pressures put on her by the institution of marriage and that in it she saw a potential for self-expression.

Without venturing further into purely speculative territory, I want to emphasize that the EA of deliberation, in this case, neglected the ambivalence Christabel felt towards her options due to the conflicting EA of self-expression. This allowed for her action to be normatively guided by the stronger EA of self-expression, which makes her actions intentional but contrary to her deliberative judgment (s. Burch 2018, p. 961).

It is worth looking into the reasons why deliberation could happen without properly factoring in some relevant factors (in the above case the ambivalence of preferences). A full answer to this question would overextend the scope of this chapter, however, without spending too much time on it here I want to provide some intuitions as to why this might happen. Firstly, deliberation conceived of as a skill would be mastered to a greater or a lesser degree – this gives

room to argue that a less proficient deliberator could sometimes omit relevant information for his/her deliberative judgments, by virtue of this lack of mastery of the skill.

Secondly, deliberation is not purely individualistic and like any skill, it is sensitive to the agent's context of skill acquisition, which includes among others factors like the influence of role models, current trends, resources available, various environmental factors, and so on. Arguably, differences in these background conditions could manifest as different styles of deliberation picked up by different individuals and the omission of certain relevant inputs could be the result of such a stylistic difference in the type of deliberation exercised.

Last, but not least, it is a well-researched topic that factors such as stress or time pressure could (negatively) influence the quality of the decisions made (s. Stracke & Brand 2012, p. 1235). Arguably, these factors could also explain the omission of the relevant input, as one particular way of decision-quality reduction. The point is that the concrete moment in which the deliberation takes place, alongside the agent's other active habits at this time, could influence the outcome of deliberation. The metaphor of clouded judgment could be of use to visualize to a degree what this process might look like. For example, if I am very hungry and trying to figure out what to buy for dinner, my buying choices under these conditions could get biased towards foods that are easily consumable without much preparation. Put a bit differently, my decision-making habits are interacting with my general state of hunger to produce a decision with a certain bias.

If we embrace the view that deliberation and reasoning are as habitual as any other type of action can be, we stand better equipped for exploring the relationship between different states and the deliberation processes that agents perform. As I hope I have shown, this will on the one hand help us both recognize cases of *akrasia* in our theories and on the other allow us to understand them, as intentional actions. By dethroning reasoning and deliberation as the only source of our intentionality, we open up these new possibilities. It is coincidental that we've started identifying intentional action with action out of deliberation. Under this new framework, it becomes possible to see that the intentionality of deliberate action is derivable from the intentionality of the habit to deliberate in certain situations where deliberation affords itself as a tool to arrive at better outcomes.

Concluding Remarks and Prospects for Further Research

As I hope to have made tangible, there are enormous benefits to employing a pragmatist-inspired concept of habits in theoretical work. First and foremost, cases of akrasia become graspable, and practical strategies could be developed for how to avoid them, if we so wish. As already noted above, perhaps one of the most effective "treatments" is to approach unwanted akrasia as a situational phenomenon and aim to modify the contextual factors of the situation so that the habits underlying the akratic action could be more easily avoided.

Another benefit of the above account of habits and akrasia is that it gives us good grounds to start approaching agency not primarily as a rational phenomenon, but rather as a relational phenomenon involving the agent as an integral part of the world, permeated by their agential situation. The integration of this perspective is facilitated by means of habits, which on the one hand, conserve and facilitate effective strategies for acting in the world and, on the other, constitute the identity of the agent (and for human agents, their self-understanding as well).

One area in need of further research is the classification and exploration of the relations between habits of different strength and generality. For example, how does the general habit of always making certain decisions quickly, which some agents might have, interact with a habit that the agent wishes to develop in employing a specific decision-making strategy? In this context, it is also interesting to consider the hows and whys of what makes some habits the default mode of agency in certain situations.

An important question is why we employ the habit of deliberation when we find ourselves as agents in unknown territory, where we have not previously developed other habits. Of course, the phrasing of the question assumes deliberation to be a habit and a default general habit we revert to when facing the unknown. However, it is not always the case that we deliberate in such situations. A tendency we share with other species is to panic in such circumstances. Panicking, however, is also a good candidate for study from the perspective of a habit theory of agency.

Another crucial intersection that requires further investigation is the one between habits and emotions. It is possible to defend a claim that emotions are some form of general habit. This would raise interesting cases where agency perhaps indeed gets hijacked by a strong emotion.

It is worth looking at these cases from a new point of view, shifting the focus from a perceived conflict between rationality and emotions to a broader question about the common and perhaps uncommon mechanisms underlying habitual agential responses and emotional reactions. For example, in this context, we could study the fear response in life-threatening situations and how it could divert action away from a pre-mediated intention.

With this example in mind, we could consider a habit-based explanation of emotional states. Whether such an explanation is reductive and to what extent further needs to be seen. However, if there is a broad spectrum of habits ranging from narrow to broad on one axis and from more automatic to less automatic on the other, perhaps emotional responses could be mapped as consisting of a set of different habits.

In conclusion, embracing a pragmatist-inspired concept of habits in theoretical work not only helps address akrasia and understand agency as a relational phenomenon but also paves the way for further research into the classification of habits, their interactions, and the intersection with emotions. By delving deeper into these areas, we can gain a richer understanding of human and other types of agency and develop practical strategies for self-improvement and effective action in various contexts.

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Abstracts

1. Abstract English

This master's thesis delves into the pragmatic perspective of habits, aiming to elucidate their role in explaining why individuals persist in actions they deem undesirable, harmful, or morally wrong despite being presented with alternative choices. The inquiry is rooted in the classical philosophical debate on *akrasia*, commonly known as weakness of the will, and seeks to establish a connection between akratic behavior and the formation and execution of habits. By bridging philosophical conceptual work with psychological research, this thesis offers a comprehensive examination of the interplay between habits and *akrasia*.

The thesis begins by commenting on the philosophical attempts at dealing with cases of *akrasia*, in particular the ones framed in the context of the Standard Story of Agency. I argue that for an internalistic theory of agency *akrasia* is a central issue, which serves as a symptom for a greater review of the theoretical foundations of agency. In particular, claims about intentional action solely being the product of deliberation need to be revised.

I proceed by establishing a theoretical framework, based on the pragmatist movement in philosophy, that views habits as intelligent and adaptive, rather than strictly deterministic, which allows for them to be considered an alternative source of intentionality besides deliberation. Additionally, the thesis addresses the challenge of reconciling the automaticity of habits with their intentional nature, arguing that habitual actions can still be considered intentional due to their interaction with goal-directed pursuits and the agent's capacity to intervene and modify their behavior.

Keywords: habit, *akrasia*, pragmatism, intentionality, agency, habitual actions, automaticity.

2. Abstract German

Diese Masterarbeit widmet sich der pragmatischen Perspektive von Gewohnheiten und hat zum Ziel, deren Rolle bei der Erklärung der Beharrlichkeit von Individuen in Handlungen zu erläutern, die sie als unerwünscht, schädlich oder moralisch falsch betrachten, obwohl ihnen alternative Möglichkeiten zur Verfügung stehen. Die Untersuchung basiert auf der klassischen philosophischen Debatte über Akrasia, allgemein bekannt als Willensschwäche, und zielt darauf ab, eine Verbindung zwischen akratischem Verhalten und der Bildung sowie Ausführung von Gewohnheiten herzustellen. Durch die Verbindung von philosophischer Konzeptarbeit mit psychologischer Forschung bietet diese Arbeit eine umfassende Untersuchung des Zusammenspiels von Gewohnheiten und Akrasia.

Die Arbeit beginnt mit einer Betrachtung der philosophischen Ansätze zur Behandlung von Fällen von Akrasia, insbesondere derjenigen, die im Rahmen der „Standard Story of Agency“ formuliert wurden. Dabei wird argumentiert, dass Akrasia für eine internalistische Theorie der Handlungsfähigkeit ein zentrales Problem darstellt und als Symptom für eine umfassende Überprüfung der theoretischen Grundlagen der Handlungsfähigkeit dient. Insbesondere müssen Aussagen über die Absichtlichkeit von Handlungen, die ausschließlich das Ergebnis von Überlegungen sind, überarbeitet werden.

Im Anschluss wird ein theoretischer Rahmen etabliert, der auf der pragmatischen Bewegung in der Philosophie basiert und Gewohnheiten als intelligent und anpassungsfähig betrachtet, anstatt streng deterministisch. Dies ermöglicht es, Gewohnheiten als alternative Quelle der Intentionalität neben Überlegungen zu betrachten. Darüber hinaus geht die Arbeit auf die Herausforderung ein, die Automatizität von Gewohnheiten mit ihrer intentionalen Natur in Einklang zu bringen, und argumentiert, dass gewohnheitsmäßige Handlungen aufgrund ihrer Interaktion mit zielgerichteten Bestrebungen und der Fähigkeit des Agenten, einzugreifen und sein Verhalten zu ändern, dennoch als intentionale Handlungen betrachtet werden können.

Keywords: Gewohnheiten, Akrasia, Willensschwäche, Intentionalität, Handlungsfähigkeit, pragmatische Philosophie, Automatizität.