

Habit Today: Ravaïsson, Bergson, Deleuze and Us

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Abstract

Habit has been understood, through the work of Descartes, Kant and Sartre, as a form of mechanism that arrests and inhibits consciousness, thought and freedom. This article addresses the concept of habit through a different tradition that links it instead to an ever-moving world. In a world of constant change, habits are not so much forms of fixity and repetition as they are modes of encounter materiality and life. Habit is the point of transition between living beings and matter, enabling each to be transformed through its engagement with the other. The article focuses on the work of Ravaïsson, Bergson and Deleuze, who understand habit as fundamentally creative and addressed to the future rather than consolidating the past. Habit, within this tradition, is the opening of materiality to the forms of engagement required by life, and the modification of life imposed by the requirements of a material universe. It is open-ended plasticity.

Keywords

Bergson, Deleuze, habit, life, materiality, Ravaïsson

The concept of habit has for us today something of an old-fashioned, even habitual, ring about it. It is a concept that has tended to be neglected, along with much else about our bodily attunement to a real world of other living beings and natural forces, with the postmodern fascination with representation and its linguistic and signifying effects. But language and representation must themselves be

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understood as forms of habit, skills we acquire either in living with other speaking beings, or through tedious processes of rote learning. I am interested in addressing the question of habit more in terms of its 19th-century resonances, for it may be understood productively as one of the necessary implications of a certain ontology of life. Such an ontology is perhaps the necessary counterbalance to an overly zealous covering over of the real in a sheath of representation that marks the work of certainly many, probably most, cultural theorists and those involved in projects of political activism. Habit is a concept that has been difficult to address for much of what passes as postmodernism, for it grounds us firmly in a pre-representational real, a real made up of forces that stimulate and transform living beings through their ability to accommodate routines, activities, projects that the emergence of life amidst the real requires.

Habit marks our modes of engagement with and transformation by the real; and this is quite precisely a measure of the extent to which the real is itself transformed by living beings. We are not the only creatures of habit; all living things, from plants through the worlds of animals to the vast array of human forms of sociality and politics – and perhaps even matter itself – form habits as their vastly different modes of self-organization, which enable them to accommodate real forces and effects through the minimization of the energy and conscious awareness that concerted action involves.

Habit schematizes both the ways of being and acting of living things and the effects of the forces that impinge on and affect living things. It is thus an index not only of the internal organization of living being; it also signals a milieu or environment that living beings must internalize in order to live in comfort and with minimal energy expenditure – a cohesion (a cohesion wrought through the struggle for existence) between the living being's activities and its milieu. Habit is, in short, a much more interesting concept than its place in the recent history of western thought, and especially within both the empiricist and phenomenological traditions, enables us to see. It signals the possibility of seeing a new kind of relation between life and its surrounding support systems, a new kind of immersion of the forces of the living in the forces of the real that is far richer and more complex than the immersion and transformation of the human accomplished through the eruption of language (and moreover, which help explain this eruption).

Here I will address a tradition in French philosophy over the last two centuries that has both anticipated and elaborated the work of Charles Darwin on the relations between forms of life, species, and the environments in which they live and which test, through natural selection, to distinguish the more fit (the more attuned to an environment, but also those more prepared and able to accommodate changing environments) from the less fit. Habits are the ways in which living beings accommodate more of their environments than the constitution of instincts generally permits: habits are how environments impact and transform the forms of life they accommodate and are themselves impacted and transformed by these forms of life.

I focus, however schematically, on a lineage that has in recent years become more influential and significant than it has been for nearly a century, that of the philosophy of life that runs through the work of Félix Ravaïsson, Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, and that has Darwin as its attractive centre. In this wayward tradition, one that is only now in the process of consolidating itself and forming research paradigms, habit is regarded not as that which reduces the human to the order of the mechanical, as in the works of, for example, Descartes, Kant and Sartre, but rather as a fundamentally creative capacity that produces the possibility of stability in a universe in which change is fundamental. Habit is a way in which we can organize lived regularities, moments of cohesion and repetition, in a universe in which nothing truly repeats, in which the past accumulates with unrelenting force, ensuring that no moment can ever resemble or repeat a previous moment because it already contains the past within it. For those who affirm perpetual change, Heraclitan variation or Bergsonian duration, habit is an anchor, the rock to which the possibilities of personal identity and freedom are tethered, the condition under which learning is possible, the creation of a direction, a 'second nature', an identity.¹

Ravaïsson and Creative Habit

Ravaïsson's key work, his doctoral thesis, *Of Habit* (2008 [1838]) is a truly remarkable text, one that has been largely forgotten in the present, although its recent re-publication will no doubt invite a new audience to appreciate its subtlety. In it, Ravaïsson elaborates a profound contestation of philosophical mechanism, and the assumption

that habit is an inauthentic expression (of self, of ethics, of freedom). Part of a lineage reaching all the way from Aristotle's transformation of the Platonic opposition between the Forms and material existence, and particularly from his distinction between potentiality and actuality, between having knowledge (*hexis*, 'having', 'potential', the term from which *habitus*, 'habit', is derived) and using it to produce something, *energeia*, that makes a good life; moving through Leibniz's monadology, in which, while cut off from a direct encounter with the world, the monad nevertheless finds represented on its inside the order that constitutes its outside; and on to the work of Bichat and Maine de Biran, his direct predecessors, Ravaissón elaborates a new kind of vitalism, in which living beings (the higher the order the more there is a need for habit, a contraction or synthesis of past events) require the stability of habits to organize their world. While considered a virtue, habits also entail the possibility of a pathology. Habits exist somewhere between the necessity of ease and the torment of need, one side directed to making the world readily habitable, and making the living being at home in the familiar; the other directed to a trajectory of infinite repetition, a tic, an addiction, a limitation and constraint on life. Either one has just the right number of needs that habit addresses, or a pathological excess.

For Ravaissón, habit is both a state of the organism and a virtue or accomplishment. It is a state to the extent that habit is a 'general and permanent way of being' (2008 [1828]: 25), a way of ordering a series of successively related acts ('an existence considered ... as a unity of its elements or as the succession of its different phases'). It is a state that ensures a change in its agent, that is acquired through accommodating change and remains even when the change subsides. A habit changes its agent so that its past experiences act to anticipate what its future may require. But it is more than an acquired characteristic, an anticipatory action, for habit persists, or rather subsists, as it were beneath the changes that it is to accommodate or meet (it is not 'simply acquired habit, but habit that is contracted, owing to a change, with respect to the very change that gave birth to it' [2008 (1838): 25]). This transforms it from something one does to a virtue or capacity that one has.

Habit is change contracted, compressed, contained. In this sense, habit's contracting capacities outstrip the change it is to address. It remains there as possible or potential action even when the change

which brought it about ceases. It thus anticipates a possible change. It is, in other words, a potentiality, a possibility, a virtual mode of addressing a future change. It is this that transforms it from an activity to a disposition, or, as Ravaïsson calls it, 'a virtue', a way of behaving in the world. Habit is a change in behaviour, a virtue that is activated whether it is called for or not, a permanent or semi-permanent modification of the agent of action.²

There are two vectors at work in habits: a temporality that is open-ended, in which the future is not contained in the present, but where the present establishes certain regularities to anticipate what the future may involve; and a living being whose activities can be modified by the incorporation of stereotyped or stylized behaviours. Habits change the disposition to action; they entail a change, a new virtuality, a new tendency to act, a new potentiality. They bring about a new ability, the capacity to persist, thrive, change and grow in the face of a world that is itself subject to endless and often random change. Habits provide the ability to change one's tendencies, to reorient one's actions to address the new, and to be able to experience the unexpected.

In this, habit has more nuance, more attunement, more attention to the specific and the particular than the trigger mechanism of instinct, to which habit is related but from which it also departs. Instinct is the unmediated, undirected impulse to act towards an end. It is both more accurate and more irresistible than habit and unable to modify itself or to be activated unless its particular triggers are at work (for further details see Ravaïsson, 2008 [1838]: 57–9). Habit is a *degree* of instinct, a modifiable, pliable, learned impulse to act. It functions mid-way between reflective decision-making with its time and effort, and instinct with its unerring but unchangeable responsiveness. Habit is the point of transition, the mode by which reflective or voluntary actions function as if they were instinctive. Habit is the movement by which effort and consideration is transformed into action.

Habit performs a kind of condensation or compaction of bodily action, and a rationalization (and rationing) of the effort an act requires. It creates 'a figure, an *idea in action*' (2008 [1838]: 59). It skeletalizes action, making it more efficient, minimizing the time and effort it requires while maximizing its effects. Habit is the creation of a new bodily mode of existence, the learning of a way of simplifying action by selecting its key muscular efforts while hiding their conceptual accompaniments.

Habit is thus, for Ravaïsson, a mode of transition and movement, a middle term between two opposites, an ‘infinitesimal *differential*’, a shifting terrain that wins over nature to culture and culture to nature, that differentiates and manoeuvres action and passion, and inside and outside. It is the way in which a living being impacts its own inner nature through the attainment of external goals. It is an ‘acquired nature’ we give to ourselves, a way we make ourselves through what we must accomplish. Habit is the contraction of the history of certain actions converted into present and potential or future actions.³

Ravaïsson elaborates the ‘double law’ regarding the operation of habits that is also found in the writings of his predecessors, Bichat and Maine de Biran. The ‘double law of the contrary influence of the duration of change’ (2008 [1838]: 37) consists in the claim that, depending on the state of the living being, that is, whether it ‘merely suffers the change’ passively or whether it ‘sets it off’ actively, habit functions to mute or intensify. Habits mute or diminish the force of external impulses affecting the living being: the more frequently an impulse originating in the external world – a perception – is experienced, the less effect it tends to have.⁴ And, equally, when movements are initiated by or from within the living being – rather than imposed on it from the outside – they become easier to enact, they overcome resistance, tasks become less difficult with repeated performance. Habits diminish the impact of external impingements that are passively experienced; they fortify and strengthen the performance of actions that are internally regulated or at first consciously chosen.

Habit weakens passivity and strengthens activity. It accommodates passive impressions and gradually transforms them into desires of its own; and its own activity becomes easier and quicker, more accurate and successful, the more it occurs. Its movement becomes more and more mechanical and, in this sense, it becomes more like a passive impression. Habit thus enervates passive impressions; and it mutes and neutralizes activity. It thereby produces a state or set of desires somewhere in between activity and passivity, reversing and transforming the energies of each towards a shared middle ground, a common milieu (2008 [1838]: 51).

There is a common point, a middle ground, where the passive and the active meet, where what was once effort and consciousness is now made automatic. Where sensation and action meet and passion and action converge is in a ‘blind tendency that derives from passion

as much as from action', an 'unreflective spontaneity' that insinuates itself 'beneath the region of will, personality and consciousness' (2008 [1838]: 53). This is a tendency, a potential, to weaken or wear down (he says 'degrade') the effect of sensations and the force of effort: 'The law of habit can be explained only by the development of a Spontaneity that is at once active and passive, equally opposed to mechanical Fatality and to reflective Freedom' (2008 [1838]: 55).

Habit is the elaboration of tendency, the production of potentiality, an orientation to minimize without eliminating the effects of sensation and the effort of action. As a temporally ordering phenomenon, habit is the movement by which Aristotelian potentiality, or the virtual, is transformed into tendency, and tendency in turn is transformed into action. Habit is the action of ever-growing connection between the subject and the object of thought, it issues an 'immediate intelligence' that by-passes consciousness to produce effects around and through it. Habit is the movement by which '*idea* becomes *being*' (2008 [1838]: 55), the trajectory by which tendency acts, potentiality makes and the virtual actualizes itself.

Habit produces not only a tendency to act and the diminution of the tendency to feel; above all, it produces an 'obscure intelligence' that operates below the level of will, consciousness, intentionality or reflection, an intelligence in which all forms of life participate. This unconscious intelligence is what produces an intimate intuition, an attunement of the subject to the object, in which there are still two beings, two entities, an acting or sensing subject and an action performed or a sensation perceived, but entities that remain in the most intimate connection, mingled together with only the barest sliver of a difference between them.

Thus habit does not arrest or mechanize, or reduce consciousness to unconsciousness or automatism; rather, it brings about a new kind of consciousness, one not aware of itself but prone to act, that is activated by the possibility of its acting, that knows but cannot know that it knows.⁵ It is an anti-Cartesian intelligence, one that doesn't know but acts, that has effects, produces actions and sensations. It is as close to instinct as possible, yet with the possibility of invention, newness, transformation and learning, an intuition acted rather than known. Habit succumbs, not to mechanism or automatism, as Kant feared, but to 'attraction and desire', a 'law' that follows, paradoxically, not from necessity but from freedom itself (Ravaïsson, 2008

[1838]: 57). Rather than compulsion, habit expresses one's openness to the future, along with one's relation of connection to the past: it expresses the continuity of one's attractions and desires, a cohesion that is endlessly open to modification (as instinct is not), to custom and to expectation. Habit is the accommodation of life to its most insistent and repetitive forces and tasks, life's transformation through its engagement with a world larger than its will or consciousness.

Bergson and the Habits of Life

There is a direct lineage between Ravaïsson (and his predecessors) and the writings of Bergson. What Bergson found alluring in Ravaïsson is both his understanding of the continual processes of change that make up the world in its temporal dimension, and his understanding of philosophy as a mode of attunement to the unique and the particular.⁶ They share a commitment to a way of thinking that is linked to intuition, that is, neither a special kind of feeling, nor a mode of sympathy, but a particular kind of address that involves a direct connection between the subject and the object of knowledge. It involves a knowledge not objectified and universalized for any knowing subject but a particular, contingent connection that restores to the object the continuities that the subject must leave out in analysis.

At its best, philosophy approximates not science or mathematics but rather art. Philosophy and art are both modes of addressing what is mobile or fluid. Philosophy and art are thus more forms of attunement than they are techniques of prediction, modes of belonging-to rather than orders of measurement.⁷ For both, only the structured order, the enforced sameness that habit produces enables the creation of free acts and new knowledges. Habit both reveals our place in the natural order; and also the possibilities that we have for understanding and transforming this natural order, including that part of it that is lodged within ourselves.⁸

Bergson understands that in the writings of Ravaïsson he has found a way of restoring to the natural world its continuities; and of seeing in the knowing subject, in the subject's necessary reliance on habit and on a mode becoming-mechanistic that orders consciousness, its fundamental connection with the natural world that is itself not regulated by a mechanistic order. This is the intuition of the profoundly mobile and fluid relations that produce and constitute the

natural order in its teeming complexity, and the living beings that populate this natural order.

Habit, for Bergson, is the production of a form of stability that does not anchor living beings to their environment, but that enables free acts, acts that remain inherently unpredictable, and that in-form and produce specific types of subjectivity, to emerge from the background of habits and quasi-automatized acts. Without habits and their tendency to automatism, living beings would not have the energy and singularity of purpose that enables them to survive and to create, to produce the new, to live artistically. Habits are the movements that address an open relation to the world, a relation that is not the constraint on behaviour that instincts are, but that, by degrees, is the promise of freedom. It is only because there is some orderly repetition in both the regularities of the world and in the performative possibilities of bodies that habits can ease the burden of a creative freedom.

Bergson suggests that automatism begins the gradual evolutionary movement that directs itself to freedom: habit is an intermediary state between instincts and free acts. Intensities, sensations, forces are themselves the first signs in the history of living beings that they can rise above automatism. For him, living beings are propelled into freedom, into the various degrees of freedom that mark life, through the generation of sensations, whose force enervates and transforms actions from the givenness of a fixed reaction to the openness of free acts. Pleasure and pain are expressions of something that intervenes between stimulus and reaction to sever their direct connection, and enable a new kind of reaction, a free act, to emerge. Habit is how we modify instinct to produce the possibility of sometimes quite rare acts of freedom.⁹

Sensations are the mark of the emergence of unpredictability, a delay or gap between stimulus and response. Sensation is that which resists the direct transition from one to the other, sensations (of pleasure and pain, among others) insert a delay, a gap, between stimulus and response. Pleasure and pain are forces which unhinge automatism: they provide an outline of incipient actions, actions one could insert as a response to the stimulus but which are in no way guaranteed by it (as is instinctive behaviour). They are antidotes to automatism and provocations to the generation of new actions, actions whose repetitions will also yield pleasure. Habit is created, not through the degeneration of consciousness, but precisely as a stimulus to consciousness, as the movement from instinct to free act; they are *forms of desire*.

From his first text, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1959), Bergson understands habit and its capacity to transform living beings into free beings. Habit not only mediates nature and culture, inside and outside, but particularly freedom and necessity, as well as perception and memory. The notion that habit is a pivotal capacity in the elaboration of freedom marks all of his writings and culminates in *Creative Evolution* (1944), the text where he understands the evolutionary emergence of sentience and sensation as a function of the emergence of degrees of increasingly unpredictable movement. Movement is the condition of both sentience and of freedom. Habit constitutes a kind of substratum that supports and enables acts of great unpredictability and creativity. Without habits to support the movements that constitute our daily activities, we would not have the backdrop of assured actions against which freedom and unpredictability are highlighted.

Free acts, acts not bound to habit, are, for Bergson, quite exceptional. We are not, as the existentialists claim, thoroughly free, free in every act: rather, all living things exhibit *degrees of freedom*, linked to the openness of movements, of actions, that such beings are capable of performing. Freedom is not the contemplation of abstract possibilities of choice as the tradition of liberal philosophy has suggested, for it is not the opposite of determinism. Rather, it is associated with acts, with the capacity to act, and to undertake acts which help form a self or subject.

Acts are free only to the extent that they stand out from the bulk of our activities that are routinized. Bergson cites the familiar reaction we have to an alarm clock early in the morning, part of the habitual routine of each work-day. The alarm summons up a chain of actions: opening our eyes, turning off the alarm, getting out of bed, putting on slippers and beginning the day. It is only because we undertake these activities in a state of half-consciousness that we have the energy and interest to undertake less routinized actions, to elaborate relatively free acts. Habits, incorporating memories of past performances in similar contexts, leave both consciousness and the energetic forces of the body able to address other issues than the habitual only because the habitual accommodates so much of what is required from us.

It is not subjects who are free or not free; it is *acts* that, in expressing a consonance with their agent, are free. An act is free, for Bergson, to the extent that it satisfies two requirements: 'the self

alone will have been the author of it, and . . . it will express the whole of the self' (1959: 165–6). Free acts are those that spring from the subject alone (and not from any psychical state of the subject or any manipulated behaviour around the subject); they not only originate in or through a subject, they express all of that subject, in other words, they are integral to who or what the subject is. Free acts erupt from the subject insofar as they express the whole of that subject: 'we are free when our acts spring from our whole personality, when they express it, when they have that indefinable resemblance to it which one sometimes finds between the artist and his work' (1959: 172).

Acts are free not insofar as the subject is always the same, an essence, an identity, but insofar as the subject is transformed by and engaged through its acts, becomes through its acts.¹⁰ If freedom is located in acts rather than in subjects, then the capacity to act is to a large extent structured by the ability to harness and utilize matter for one's own purposes. Freedom is not a transcendent quality inherent in subjects but is immanent in the relations that the living being has with the material world, including other forms of life. Thus habit is required to attain this accommodation: it frees energy and consciousness to act on its conscious intentions by directing itself to the accomplishment of acts, behaviour, an active engagement with materiality.

Bergson further develops his account of habit in *Matter and Memory*. Habit is one of two ways of addressing and recalling the past, of making something of the past present in the life of living things. The past is preserved in itself and is always carried along with the present in the manner of a snowball that eternally accumulates in the life of the universe; but in the case of a living thing, although it carries the history it has accumulated in its body, which is the result of eons of successive generations and their struggles for existence, one cannot retain in consciousness even a tiny fraction of this vast and ineradicable history.

The past survives in and through the present, or actualizes its virtual forces, through two means – in bodily habits and in recollections, which are modes of conscious remembering of specific events, events which are locatable in a definite moment of time, are remembered in perceptual terms, in detail, and are capable of a more in-depth elaboration with effort.¹¹ These memories, the objects of both consciousness and the unconscious, are the ways in which the past returns as an image in the present. In order to attend to such memories, we require

preparation, a mode of cutting ourselves off from the teeming distractions of regular perception. Often we close our eyes or stare blankly when we try hard to retrieve a particular memory ('my sixteenth birthday', 'my first day at school'). Remembering in this sense is quite laborious. It requires considerable effort to sustain, or at least an environment whose perceptual requirements are minimized.¹² Bergson understands habit as a kind of rote form of memory. He suggests that, like learning lines by heart, habit is acquired through repetition which binds various actions, bodily performances and forms of muscular exertion gradually into a continuous whole.

Habits have three particular characteristics: they are acquired by repetition; they demand a decomposition and recomposition of various actions or practices; and they are contracted, that is, 'stored up in a mechanism which is set in motion as a whole by an initial impulse, in a closed system of automatic movements which succeed each other in the same order and, together, take the same length of time' (1988: 81). Habits reconstitute what would be or could be considered conscious movements by a process of analysis or decomposition. Habits are forms of contraction, forms of inherence or subsistence. All the actions are telescoped into the first movement that triggers habitual behaviour.

Habits are thus memories that are activated unconsciously and without effort as preparatory for action. If memory-proper encourages invention and newness by opening up the actual world of perception to the unused up or virtual resources of the past, habit provides the energy and intellectual resources for newness by attempting to order and regulate the bulk of our energies to non-habitual actions. Habit is incipient action, action anticipated; it is memory accumulated in order to act. Memory-proper is contemplation, reverie, the slowing down, arrest or simplification of movement: habit is the complexification of movement through its routinization. Habit is a form of accumulation of memory and repetition in the body. Where memory represents and imagines the past, habit acts and repeats it.¹³

Habit is not memory-proper repeated indefinitely. Memory-proper does not bear indefinite repetition. Each repetition constitutes another concrete and particular memory that is carried with the next repetition. Memory individuates to the extent that habit routinizes. Habit is memory oriented to action, to practice: it is memory which has a vested interest in the present. As for Ravaïsson, for Bergson it

lies mid-way between an instinct and a consciously chosen action. Habit becomes conscious only to the extent that it does not attain its habituated end. Otherwise it is memory lived as bodily preparedness.

The past is stored up, for Bergson, either in the form of recollections, which add to and complicate our free actions in the present, or in the form of corporeal habits which enhance our free actions by routinizing and containing all other actions. Memory-proper inhibits nature for it generates the possibility of inserting the unpredictable or the uncontrollable into the present. It accounts for free actions, for inventions, for the efficacy of the non-habitual. But it is only because habit provides an anchor in a world that is ever-changing that the past is able to stabilize and orient the present. Habit is the acquired part of our nature, a nature directed outward to action.

Deleuze, Repetition, Contraction and Synthesis

As is by now well known, Deleuze, probably the most significant Bergsonian of the late 20th century, is largely responsible for the revitalization of interest in Bergson. What fascinated him about Bergson was Bergson's understanding of the object of philosophical speculation: philosophy, for Bergson, is the attunement to the unique and the particular, a mode of addressing the singular, just as Bergson himself was attracted to Ravaïsson. It is the creation of a method (intuition) and an object (the unique and the particular) through understanding a series of processes (becoming, differentiation) that fascinated Deleuze. For Deleuze, Bergson is the greatest theorist of difference, the philosopher who best understood that philosophy is a way of enhancing life rather than a mode of truth, objectivity or neutrality. Philosophy is about addressing the real, it is a form of ontology before it is capable of providing an epistemology. Philosophy may be able to understand life in its specificity through understanding the temporality, the movement from past to present and the beings, subjects and objects, produced by this movement, something that intelligence alone cannot adequately understand. If science is focused on understanding the object, and metaphysics on conceptualizing the subject of knowledge, it is only philosophy (and in its own way, art) that can address the gaps and divisions between these domains, the differences that link and separate them:

Bergson denounces a common danger in science and in metaphysics: allowing difference to escape – because science conceives the thing as a product and a result, while metaphysics conceives being as something unmovable that serves as a principle. . . . Being in fact is on the side of difference, neither singular nor multiple. . . . Being is alteration, alteration is substance. And that is what Bergson calls *duration* . . . (Deleuze, 2004a: 25)

Deleuze develops Bergson's concept of the virtual, the force of differentiation that transforms itself in the process of creating objects (including living beings) that are themselves ever differentiated and differentiating.¹⁴ The virtual is a continually changing series of force-effects, force-impulses that make the real, but make it in such a way that it must always differ from itself, always be in the process of self-explication. The virtual actualizes forces of differentiation, forces that convert themselves as they are elaborated, and these forces of differentiation generate new virtuals, new processes of actualization, new modes of differentiation in a veritable universe, an infinite cloud, of forces of change: 'Every actual surrounds itself with a cloud of virtual images.'¹⁵ The virtual is both emitted into and absorbed by the actuals it generates: it pulses into and out of itself in an ever-changing whirl. The virtual is a momentary indeterminate force, surrounding actuals like a cloud, always in the process of becoming something, an actual. It consists in infinitely brief forces of opening out that continually transform themselves and are transformed in the processes of actualization. This is why Deleuze understands the virtual as the site of creation and destruction. This indeterminacy is the very openness of time itself, the very possibility of the virtual transforming with great rapidity into a new virtual.¹⁶

The question that such ontological models raise is how some force of order, some process of stabilization, may wrench from the turbulence of these forces of differentiation a measure of rest, a kind of cohesion or unity, a continuity over time. It is this that occupies Deleuze in many of his key writings, not only in his earliest texts, clustered around *Bergsonism*, but also from *Difference and Repetition* (1994) to *What is Philosophy?* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994). He is interested in the question of difference as generative, as creative force, as that which complicates all forms of identity and resemblance. He is thus also interested in all of his writings in the

openness of forces, the ways in which the present actualizes the virtual forces of the past to open out these virtualities to the emerging future. But for him, difference, divergence, variation, elaboration also requires repetition, never sameness or identity, but generative repetition and its creative forms, contraction, synthesis or habit.

For Deleuze, habit is thus the condition for the emergence of time itself. It is that which living beings, and perhaps those objects that are on the verge of an emergence into another order, contracting the past into the future in the form of habit. Habit is the way in which life accommodates materiality and brings its own materiality into coordination with the material forces that regulate its environment. Materiality itself is a tendency to elaboration, to temporization, the processes of the becoming-alive of the inorganic: to the extent that matter can contract the forces that produce its particular form, it is this tendency, this potentiality or this virtual orientation.

Bergson understands that even the plant has an incipient consciousness, a vegetative consciousness that consists in the contraction and synthesis of the elements it requires. Even the plant, in other words, has habits, modes of repeated engagement with its environment. Even the plant has a kind of memory, embodied in its cellulose structure, and in the arrangement of roots, leaves, branches and flowers or fruits, a memory that gives it regularized forms of engagement with what it needs to continue to live. The plant, as Deleuze and Guattari understand, is on its way to a new kind of brain. It has already begun a brain-becoming, a mode of self-survey, of immediate self-proximity,¹⁷ in its very ability to discern and extract what it requires from what earth, sun and the various forces of the earth offer it:

The plant contemplates by contracting the elements from which it originates – light, carbon, and the salts – and it fills itself with colors and odors that in each case qualify its variety, its composition: it is sensation in itself. It is as if flowers smell themselves by smelling what composes them, first attempts at vision or of sense of sense, before being perceived or even smelled by an agent with a nervous system and a brain. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 212)

Habit, behaviour contracted into its first steps, is that which characterizes every temporal being, even the most resolutely unliving forms of matter. The crystal contracts the forces, the pressures that

transformed it into its present form: carbon is itself a cycle as much as a chemical, a movement from one form to another. This is the ‘origin’ of what Deleuze understands as a kind of ‘non-organic life’, life without organs or organism. Contraction is how the very chemistry of the earth and the cosmos creates a brain for itself, a microbrain, a network of microbrains, a mode of connection and hesitation, a mode of openness or indeterminacy, for itself:

Not every organism has a brain, and not all life is organic, but everywhere there are forces that constitute microbrains, or an inorganic life of things. We can dispense with Fechner’s or Conan Doyle’s splendid hypothesis of a nervous system of the earth only because the force of contracting or preserving, that is to say, of feeling appears only as a global brain in relation to the elements contracted directly and to the mode of contraction, which differ depending on the domain and constitute precisely irreducible varieties. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 213)

Contraction is the condition of contemplation or self-survey: it is the becoming-brain even of objects which have no brain, the becoming-alive of that which is inorganic, the tendency to protract, to complicate and thus to open out, differentiate or actualize. Contraction preserves even that which does not act: and it detaches itself, as Bergson recognized, from either action or perception. Contraction can only function as detachment, as a kind of contemplation, a pause between one action or perception and another. Deleuze and Guattari here refer to that detachment that creates the possibility of contracting the past into the present, the possibility for forming habits. This possibility does not require a brain so much as create one, creating a series of brain-becomings that populate the universe as one of its virtual directions:

the contraction that preserves is always in a state of detachment in relation to action or even to movement and appears as a pure contemplation without knowledge. This can be seen even in the cerebral domain par excellence of apprenticeship or the formation of habits: although everything seems to take place by active connections and progressive integrations, from one test to another, the tests or cases, the occurrences, must, as Hume showed, be contracted in a contemplating ‘imagination’ while remaining distinct in relation to actions and to knowledge. Even when one is a rat, it is through contemplation that one ‘contracts’ a habit. It is still necessary to discover, beneath

the noise of actions, those internal creative sensations or those silent contemplations that bear witness to the brain. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 213)

Habits and Us

Habit, which is considered to be very low on the scale of life for most philosophies, particularly for the forms of philosophy that privilege consciousness, is regarded as something that attests largely to man's animal nature rather than to the uniquely human, is utterly transformed in the lineage that runs from Ravaïsson to Bergson and then to Deleuze (a lineage that, if stretched backward, would also have to include Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume and others). This is a history of various struggles to understand the forces of self-overcoming that generate the possibilities of matter transforming itself, and life transforming itself through the transformations that matter generates. Habit not only anchors a site of regularity in a universe of perpetual change; it initiates change in the apparently unchanging, it opens up the possibility of understanding the very force of temporality itself, the force that adheres the past to the present and orients both to the possibilities of action in the future.

Habit is not the inert in us that reveals our affinity with the animal: it is, paradoxically, a dynamic force that opens up the universe, both its living and non-living forces, to contraction, to contemplation, and thus, by way of deflection, to free action, to radical change. Habit, on the border between the absolutely constrained and the radically free, transforms the constrained into degrees of freedom, degrees of openness. Habit, in enabling an ease of action and diminishing feeling or sensation, as Ravaïsson recognized, not only opens up the living being to the acquisition of new characteristics and capacities, it also opens up the universe itself to being otherwise, to accommodating multiple forms of life with its own openness, with its necessary duplication of the present and the actual with the unspent forces of the past and the virtual.

What is this to us in the present, we who are habituated to think of philosophy as redundant or unnecessary? Habit has been the object of numerous strategies and tactics: the acquisition of 'good' habits and the 'war' on 'bad' habits, especially those habits that become life-endangering (even if life-intensifying), addictions of all kinds, have required the intervention of government agencies and institutions. Governments, indeed economic systems, have risen or fallen

according to how the habits of segments of populations are elaborated, encouraged or transformed. Habit has been regarded as something to be managed and regulated, privileging good habits (saving, wise investment, healthy lifestyles) and punishing bad ones (the criminalization of drug addiction, and the medicalization of many other types of addiction) in order to attain a desired outcome (ever-growing needs, which are all capable of modification as the economy requires). It has thus occupied the scrutiny of many disciplines and social practices, from the natural and medical sciences to the social sciences and even the humanities. Most of these disciplines, while less interested in adjusting habits so that they conform to social needs and expectations than various social institutions whose object is the regulation of social bodies, nevertheless assume that habits are the part of us that can be adjusted, altered, oriented in one way or another, that they are the part of us that can be manipulated, perhaps even from the outside, to attain various goals. Habits directed to chosen goals (regular exercise, the right kind of diet and so on) are to be encouraged while habits that debilitate or defy can be worked on and adjusted.

Philosophical reflection may be able to provide another angle on habits. It does not help us to order or regulate habits, for the goal of philosophy is not the transformation of behaviour so much as the creation of concepts which may or may not address any particular form of behaviour. It may thus be able to discern another dimension to habits than those that make habit the object of social manipulation. Habit is one of the modes of connection that link living beings to a world which is open to innovative behaviour: it is the link that bridges the relations between the organic and the inorganic, introducing the needs of the organism to its environment and inserting its environment into the behaviour of the organism.

Habit deserves to be understood not simply as one of the objects of social regulation, the attainment of good habits and the elimination of bad habits; it deserves to have its ontological place restored, to have this rich lineage which produced it as a philosophical concept continued into the future. Understanding habit in terms beyond automatism implies a new understanding of the inorganic universe and a new understanding of its processes of generating, supporting and moving towards the organic, its becoming-brain. This is what we have inherited from the 19th and 20th centuries, and what presses on us now: an

understanding of the inter-implications of forms of life with inorganic forces, the processes by which the universe comes to contemplate itself.

Notes

1. As Catherine Malabou states in her introduction to a new English translation of Ravaïsson:

For beings subject to change, habit is the law of being. Without a general and permanent disposition, a ‘virtue’, which is developed as a result of change, as resistance to this change, the finite being cannot endure, would not have time to live. For such a being, being is fused with the habit of being. (Malabou in Ravaïsson, 2008 [1838]: vii)

2. ‘Habit is thus a disposition relative to change, which is engendered in being by the continuity or the repetition of this very same change’ (Ravaïsson, 2008 [1838]: 25).
3. Like effort between action and passion, habit is the dividing link, or the middle term, between will and nature; but it is a moving middle term, a dividing line that is always moving, and which advances by an imperceptible progress from one extremity to the other.

Habit is thus, so to speak, the infinitesimal *differential*, or, the dynamic *fluxion* from Will to Nature. Nature is the limit of the regressive movement proper to habit. (Ravaïsson, 2008 [1838]: 59)

4. They become more and more slight, affecting the physical constitution of the organs less and less. The gradual weakening of receptivity seems more and more, therefore, to be the effect of a hyper-organic cause. From another perspective, the movements are increasingly disproportionate to the impressions of receptivity. (2008 [1838]: 37)
5. Not only, then, do the movements that habit gradually removes from the will not leave the sphere of intelligence to pass into the grip of a blind mechanism, but they also do not withdraw from the same intelligent activity from which they were born. A foreign force does not come to direct these movements; it is still the same force that forms their principle, but that, within them, surrenders itself more and more to the attractions of its own thought. It is the same force that, without losing anything of its higher

unity in personality, proliferates without being divided; that descends without going under; that dissolves itself, in different ways, into its inclinations, acts and ideas; that is transformed in time and disseminated in space. (2008 [1838]: 57)

6. Bergson's only major publication on Ravaïsson was written in 1900, on the occasion of Ravaïsson's death, as a kind of memorial to his life and work. See 'The Life and Work of Ravaïsson', in Bergson (1946: 261–300).
7. The whole philosophy of Ravaïsson springs from the idea that art is a figured metaphysics, that metaphysics is a reflection of art, and that it is the same intuition, variously applied, which makes the profound philosopher and the great artist. (Bergson, 1946: 274).
8. Bergson understands in Ravaïsson the elaboration of a new kind of intuition, a new mode of doing philosophy itself:

[Of Habit] . . . is a whole philosophy of nature. . . . What is nature? How is one to imagine its inner workings? What does it conceal under the regular succession of cause and effect? Does it really conceal something, or is it not perhaps reduced, in short, to an entirely superficial deployment of movements mechanically enmeshed in one another? In conformity with his principle, Ravaïsson seeks the solution of this very general problem in a very concrete intuition; the one we have of our own particular condition when we contract a habit. For motor habit, once contracted, is a mechanism, a series of movements which determine one another: it is that part of us which is inserted into nature and which coincides with nature; it is nature itself. Now, our inner experience shows us in habit an activity which has passed, by imperceptible degrees, from consciousness to unconsciousness and from will to automatism. Should we not then imagine nature, in this form, as an obscured consciousness and a dormant will? Habit thus gives us the living demonstration of this truth, that mechanism is not sufficient to itself: it is, so to speak, only the fossilised residue of a spiritual activity. (Bergson, 1946: 274–5)

9. we rise by imperceptible stages from automatic to free movements, and . . . the latter differ from the former principally in introducing an affective sensation between the external action which occasions them and the volitional reaction which ensues. Indeed, all our actions might have been automatic, and we can surmise that there are many organised beings in whose case an

external stimulus causes a definite reaction without calling up consciousness as an intermediate agent. If pleasure and pain make their appearance in certain privileged beings, it is probably to call forth a resistance to the automatic reaction which would have taken place: either sensation has nothing to do, or it is nascent freedom. But how would it enable us to resist the reaction which is in preparation if it did not acquaint us with the nature of the latter by some definite sign? And what can this sign be but the sketching, and, as it were, the prefiguring of the future automatic movements in the very midst of the sensation which is being experienced. (Bergson, 1959: 33–4)

10. Those who ask whether we are free to alter our character lay themselves open to [this] objection. Certainly our character is altering imperceptibly every day, and our freedom would suffer if these new acquisitions were grafted on to our self and not blended with it. But, as soon as this blending takes place, it must be admitted that the change which has supervened in our character belongs to us, that we have appropriated it. (Bergson, 1959: 172)
11. These record in the forms of memory-images, all the events of our daily life as they occur in time; it neglects no detail; it leaves to each fact, each gesture, its place and date. Regardless of utility or of practical application, it stores up the past by the mere necessity of its own nature. By this memory is made possible the intelligent, or rather, intellectual recognition of perception already experienced; in it we take refuge every time that, in the search for a particular image, we remount the slope of our past. (Bergson, 1988: 81)
12. To call up the past in the form of an image, we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, we must have the power to value the useless, we must have the will to dream. Man alone is capable of such an effort. But even in him the past to which he returns is fugitive, ever on the point of escaping him, as though his backward turning memory were thwarted by the other, more natural, memory, of which the forward movement bears him on to action and to life. (Bergson, 1988: 82–3)
13. Thus is gradually formed an experience of an entirely different order, which accumulates within the body, a series of mechanisms wound up and ready, with reactions to external stimuli

ever more numerous and more varied and answers ready prepared to an ever-growing number of possible solicitations. We become conscious of these mechanisms as they come into play; this consciousness of a whole past of efforts stored up in the present is indeed also a memory, but a memory profoundly different from the first, always bent upon action, seated in the present, and always looking to the future. It has retained from the past only the intelligently coordinated movements which represent the accumulated efforts of the past; it recovers those past efforts not in the memory-images which recall them, but in the definite order and systematic character with which the actual movements take place. In truth it no longer *represents* our past to us, it *acts* it; and if it still deserves the name of memory, it is not because it conserves bygone images, but because it prolongs their useful effect into the present moment. (Bergson, 1988: 81–2)

14. What differentiates itself is *first* that which differs from itself, in other words, the virtual. . . . Differentiation is not the concept, but the production of objects that finds its cause or reason in the concept. Only if we accept that which differs from itself must be such a concept, then the virtual must have a consistency, an objective consistency that enables it to differentiate itself, to produce such objects. (Deleuze, 2004b: 43)
15. The virtuals, encircling the actual, perpetually renew themselves by emitting yet others, with which they are in turn surrounded and which go on in turn to react upon the actual: ‘in the heart of the cloud of the virtual there is a virtual of yet a higher order . . . every virtual particle surrounds itself with a virtual cosmos and each in its turn does likewise indefinitely’ (Deleuze, quoting Michel Cassé, *Du Vide et de la création*, pp. 72–3, in Deleuze and Parnet, 2002: 148).
16. They are called virtual in so far as their emission and absorption, creation and destruction, occur in a period of time shorter than the shortest continuous period imaginable; it is this very brevity that keeps them subject to a principle of uncertainty or indetermination. (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002: 148)
17. Deleuze refers to Raymond Ruyer’s (1952) concept of self-survey in understanding a proximity that does not require an outside perspective.

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