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Beyond Compulsion: Félix Ravaisson's Conception of Habit

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**BEYOND COMPULSION:
FÉLIX RAVAISSON'S CONCEPTION OF HABIT**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

by

Christopher Forrest Johnson
B.A., The Ohio State University, 2019
B.A., The Ohio State University, 2019
May 2023

Let not habit do violence to you . . .

—Parmenides

On Nature

One becomes accustomed over time to the most violent poisons.

—Félix Ravaisson

Of Habit

We are habits, nothing but habits—the habit of saying “I.”
Perhaps, there is no more striking answer to the problem of the Self.

—Gilles Deleuze

Empiricism and Subjectivity

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Although I try (and fail) to avoid framing my gratitude in terms of the language of ‘debt’ or ‘indebtedness,’ I’m nonetheless deeply grateful to a number of individuals without whom the following pages would’ve remained unwritten. First, I’d like to thank Professor Deborah Goldgaber for agreeing to direct the present thesis. Debbie’s honest and insightful feedback has multiplied my humility at every stage of this project—my writing has no doubt improved in light of the high bar she set for me. I’m also incredibly grateful to the other two members of my committee, Professor John Protevi and Professor François Raffoul, for their combined wisdom, support, and generosity. LSU is very lucky to have them.

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Abstract

In opposition to a tendency present within the history of Western philosophy to regard ‘habit’ as a conservative force (represented by figures including Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant), contemporary philosophers working on habit (including Clare Carlisle and Catherine Malabou) have marshaled the thought of nineteenth century French philosopher Félix Ravaisson. With recourse to the ‘double law of habit,’ Ravaisson, in his 1838 doctoral thesis, depicts habit as both resistance and receptivity to change. I begin, in Chapter One, with a brief overview of the aforementioned negative evaluations of habit, as surveyed separately by Carlisle and Malabou. As these contemporary philosophers observe, Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant (among others) mistake habit for little more than mindless, mechanistic repetition. Habit, in their view, forestalls our efforts to both exercise reason and act freely. So understood, habit consists in a conservative force, capable only of ceaselessly reproducing the same. ‘Habit’ would thus appear synonymous with ‘compulsion.’ In order to rescue habit from this mistaken identification, I offer, in Chapter Two, a philosophical account of compulsion. After isolating the relevant sense of ‘compulsion,’ of which Freud’s theory of repetition-compulsion is exemplary (and which I distinguish from Aristotle’s more originary discussion of compulsion as *anankē*), I conclude that it is ‘compulsion’ (and not ‘habit’) that more properly names a conservative force marked by a resistance to change. In Chapter Three, I turn to the accounts of habit levied by Hume and Ravaisson to show that the force of habit exceeds mere resistance to change. Hume, emphasizing reason’s limited explanatory power, hypothesizes the existence of a psychological faculty he terms ‘custom,’ or ‘habit,’ which is responsible for supplying us with our beliefs about the future. Ravaisson, exempt from Hume’s restrictive empiricism, goes further by filling in a boldly vitalist account of habit. Attentive to both constancy and

change, habit's plasticity renders it irreducible to the conservative force of compulsion. I conclude, in line with Carlisle and Malabou (and in spite of Derrida's critique), that habit, in the sense understood by Ravaisson, represents an instance of the *pharmakon*: at once poison as well as cure.

Chapter 1. Introduction

For some, the theme of habit will appear at best mundane, everyday, pedestrian—while appearing at worst uninspired, boring, or plainly dull. But is it habit’s subject matter which gives it this character, or is this rather a product of its ubiquity? Habit appears everywhere on the scene, from the moment each of us takes our first few breaths. For this reason, very few of our preoccupations today can rival habit’s stranglehold on the present; year after year, scores of new titles appear in the popular press promising to divulge an esoteric wisdom to which only those blessed with the right habits have hitherto laid claim. And yet, habit, by all accounts, has long represented a site of significant contention in the history of Western philosophy. In spite of its celebration by Aristotle, Hegel, and others, another contingent has historically looked on habit with ire.¹ Under a certain formulation, the central task of philosophy can very well appear to be that of *overcoming our habits*. This theme is present even in early classical Greek philosophy. Amid the discussion of education in Book VII of Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates explains that although “the other so-called virtues of the soul are akin to those of the body, for they really aren’t there beforehand but are added later by habit and practice. . . . the virtue of reason seems to belong above all to something more divine, which never loses its power but is either useful and beneficial or useless and harmful, depending on the way it is turned.”² Accordingly, the task of education lies in turning the soul by changing its desires, compelling it to focus on the good.³ Doing so requires freeing ourselves from our everyday habits, especially those which forestall from the very

¹ Clare Carlisle, *On Habit* (London: Routledge, 2014), 3.

² Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 518d–519a.

³ *Ibid.*, 518c–d.

outset our attempts at learning: that is, turning the soul in the direction of the good.⁴ The allegory of the cave, therefore, can seem to entail an accompanying injunction to free ourselves from the shackles of our everyday habits.

Clare Carlisle and Catherine Malabou, two contemporary philosophers working separately on the concept of 'habit' (among other topics), have each drawn significant influence from the thought of nineteenth century French philosopher Félix Ravaisson. Ravaisson, relatively unknown outside of the Francophone philosophical scene, wrote his 1838 doctoral thesis on habit. It was not until 2008 that Ravaisson's thesis, entitled *De l'habitude*, was finally translated into English as *Of Habit*.⁵ The translation was brought to completion by Clare Carlisle, along with philosopher Mark Sinclair. In addition, Carlisle authored a 2014 study entitled *On Habit*, which surveys a dizzying array of habit's commentators in the history of Western philosophy.⁶ These include figures like Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche, as well as lesser-known figures like Joseph Butler, Maine de Biran, and Ravaisson himself. American philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce and William James are also invited to weigh in. In addition to a few contemporary voices, including Derrida and Deleuze, Carlisle also considers reflections on habit which admit of a more religious bent. Beyond the aforementioned names, she also consults the thought of Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther, as well as Kierkegaard, Bergson, and Proust. She argues that:

From this long tradition of enquiry into habit emerge two lines of interpretation. According to the first, habit is an obstacle to reflection and a threat to freedom. Insofar as we think and act out of habit, we are unable to know ourselves or reflect critically on the world, and so we are intellectually, morally, and spiritually impoverished. Habit is a degradation of life, reducing

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Félix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, trans. Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair (London: Continuum, 2008).

⁶ Clare Carlisle, *On Habit* (London: Routledge, 2014).

spontaneity and vitality to mechanical routine. . . . According to the second interpretation, habit is an indispensable part of life: it not only brings order, consistency and comfort to our ever-changing experiences, but also allows us to be creative and free.⁷

This characterization of habit's ambivalent reception in the history of Western philosophy is echoed in comments made by others working on habit, including Catherine Malabou.

Malabou, now firmly established as a highly original philosopher in her own right (with over a dozen book-length titles to her name), is especially noteworthy for her contributions to 'new materialism.'⁸ In addition to her own work on the related concepts of 'plasticity' and 'habit,' Malabou wrote the preface to the English translation of Ravaissou's thesis. She opens her preface, entitled "Addiction and Grace," with the following claim: "There are, in the European philosophical tradition, two basic ways of speaking of habit."⁹ The first way "sees in habit a primary ontological phenomenon. 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."¹⁰ This is the description of habit, she argues, which is present in the thought of Aristotle, Hegel, Maine de Biran, Ravaissou, and Bergson.¹¹ The second basic way in which philosophers have approached the theme of habit, which was "initiated by Descartes and continued by Kant, sees in habit the epitome of inauthenticity, a simulacrum of being, an imitation of virtue. Pure mechanism, routine process,

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ Much of Malabou's work responds to recent developments in neuroscience: the discovery of neuroplasticity "is seen as heralding a new materialism that marks a radical break with mechanistic ways of understanding the brain as a fixed or 'hard-wired' system" (Ibid., 22). See, for example, Malabou's *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (2008).

⁹ Catherine Malabou, "Addiction and Grace," preface to Félix Ravaissou's *Of Habit*, trans. Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair, vii–xx (London: Continuum, 2008), vii.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

devitalization of sense, habit is the disease of repetition that threatens the freshness of thought . . .”¹² In the present chapter, I draw on both Carlisle and Malabou’s descriptions to outline the negative appraisal of habit represented by figures including Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant. I also touch on Kierkegaard and Bergson. These figures epitomize a trend in philosophy which accords habit a negative valuation, stemming from the contention that habit admits of little more than a form of mindless, mechanistic repetition. This mechanistic repetition, owing to its implied causal determinism, poses a threat to such ideas as volition and freedom. For this reason, habit, so understood, is something which the aforementioned figures think demands primarily to be overcome. Their mistaken premise, as Carlisle and Malabou will both argue, is that habit can be reduced entirely to mechanism. Instead, Carlisle and Malabou each make a plea for a revitalized account of habit: that is, a return to the practice of recognizing in habit a dynamic force, one whose plasticity not only accounts for constancy and repetition, but also represents an openness to change. It is this felt need which renders a return to Ravaisson’s account of habit a welcome endeavor. As Malabou explains, we need only look to Ravaisson for an account which acknowledges that “it is one and the same force, one and the same principle, which produces habit at once as grace (ease, facility, power) and as addiction (machinic repetition).”¹³ Following the present historical framing, I conclude this chapter by outlining, in broad strokes, a plan for the pages to follow.

Returning now to her preface, “Addiction and Grace,” Malabou associates the negative appraisal of habit’s philosophical value with the thought of both Descartes and Kant. In his

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., viii.

Meditations on First Philosophy (1641), Descartes' fireside reflections are peppered with grievances concerning the tendency for that which is habitual or customary to interrupt his rationalist exercises. The first meditation closes with the following complaint: "this undertaking is arduous, and a certain laziness brings me back to my customary way of living."¹⁴ Drawing analogically on the allegory of the cave, Descartes describes his plight as that of the prisoner who cannot help but slip into the easy satisfaction of "pleasant illusions."¹⁵ Breaking out of and freeing oneself from these customary or habitual modes of thought requires the exercise of reason, a rather taxing activity which entails the overcoming of passivity in favor of activity. Later, as he begins the sixth meditation, he describes how the force of habit causes him to represent as corporeal even those ideas which are confused, like the thousand-sided object.¹⁶ And a few pages later, he laments his "habit of making reckless judgements."¹⁷ But in fact, Descartes' attitude toward habit may be more ambivalent than Malabou acknowledges. Concerning his achievements in the *Meditations*, Carlisle states:

Descartes proposes a method of searching for certain knowledge that involves disrupting customary beliefs and habitual ways of thinking, but he also stresses the importance of cultivating a habit of attention to our own judgements. He discovers that he falls into error when his will exceeds his intellect—that is, when he wants to form judgements about things that he doesn't properly understand. Since reason alone cannot overcome the fallibility of his knowledge, habit has to come to the rescue.¹⁸

Descartes' ambivalent attitude toward habit is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his final treatise, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649): "And we must note that what are commonly called virtues are

¹⁴ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: In Which the Existence of God and the Distinction of the Soul from the Body are Demonstrated*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 17.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 48.

¹⁷ Ibid., 54.

¹⁸ Carlisle, *On Habit*, 55.

habits in the soul that dispose it to certain thoughts: they are distinct from the thoughts themselves, but can produce them, and reciprocally be produced by them.”¹⁹ In other words, even in spite of his opposition to customary ways of thinking, Descartes recognizes the positive role which habituation can play toward that very end.²⁰

On this point, Carlisle links Descartes with Spinoza, even in spite of their differences (including, most pointedly, the latter’s critique of Cartesian dualism): “Descartes and Spinoza, like the Stoics before them, advocate practices of intellectual discipline and attentiveness even as they battle against habitual ways of thinking.”²¹ Like Descartes, Spinoza too claims that habit “leads us astray and prevents us from perceiving the deep intelligibility of nature.”²² In Spinoza’s *Ethics* (1677), after identifying thought which emanates from the imagination as one among three basic forms of knowledge, Spinoza ultimately dismisses the imagination as “*the only cause of falsity*,” since it produces “ideas which are inadequate and confused.”²³ For Spinoza, ideas which emanate from the imagination are inadequate owing to its regulation by habit. Therefore, Carlisle concludes: “Although the imagination seems to be more subjective than reason, it is in becoming rational that a person learns to think for herself. According to Spinoza, the transition from habit to reason is a shift from passivity to activity.”²⁴ Spinoza’s insistence on the importance of overcoming habit—that is, jettisoning passivity in favor of activity—thus appears even more radical than that of Descartes.

¹⁹ René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul and Other Late Philosophical Writings*, trans. Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 262.

²⁰ As Carlisle notes, further support for the claim that Descartes’ assessment of habit is not purely negative can be found in his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, in which he writes favorably about habit formation (Carlisle, *On Habit*, 56).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), IIp41.

²⁴ Carlisle, *On Habit*, 45.

However, more allergic to habit than either of the two previous figures is Kant, for whom “all habits are reprehensible.”²⁵ Refusing to acknowledge any distinction between good and bad habits, Kant holds that habit stands in the way of our ability to act freely and in accordance with duty. According to this view, habit, as Malabou puts it, “stifles the voice, repeatable but never stale, of the categorical imperative.”²⁶ As Kant explains, the influence of habit “deprives even good actions of their moral worth because it impairs the freedom of the mind and, moreover, leads to thoughtless repetition of the very same act (monotony), and so becomes ridiculous.”²⁷ Habit, if understood in terms of this ‘thoughtless repetition of the very same,’ eats away at “our innate moral worth, making us ‘ridiculous’ and machine-like.”²⁸ Kant’s claim—that between the categories of the habitual and the moral lies a basic incompatibility—is echoed in comments made by Kierkegaard, to whom I turn in a moment.

As I mentioned earlier, Malabou allies Bergson’s account of habit with that of Ravaissou.²⁹ Though, indeed, both of these French philosophers “had regarded habit as following on from deliberate mental acts,” Carlisle notes that there are significant differences between the two.³⁰ As she explains:

When habit’s ‘obscure activity’ produces need, the range of one’s desire becomes restricted to certain sensations. . . . For Ravaissou, this is the extreme and pathological end of a wide spectrum of habit: actions that ‘gradually degenerate’ into compulsive movements, or ‘tics,’ vividly illustrate the principle by which a habitual action becomes ‘a tendency, an inclination that no longer awaits the commands of the will but rather anticipates them.’ Bergson, by contrast, suggests that all habitual actions degenerate into rigid automatism. While Ravaissou

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 40.

²⁶ Malabou, “Addiction and Grace,” vii.

²⁷ Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, 40.

²⁸ Carlisle, *On Habit*, 3.

²⁹ Malabou, “Addiction and Grace,” vii.

³⁰ Carlisle, *On Habit*, 40.

. . . regards habit as a principle of life, both natural and divine, Bergson sees it as quasi-mechanical.³¹

That is, while Ravaisson sees habit in terms of a continuum, with compulsion merely lying on one extreme, Bergson regards habit as flattening into a ‘quasi-mechanical’ form of ‘rigid automatism.’ However, Bergson also thinks that habit’s mechanistic character ought to invite laughter.³² According to Carlisle, “Bergson argues that human habit is laughable because it represents a kind of betrayal of vitality by the being in whom life should find its highest expression.”³³ In spite of Bergson’s willingness to regard habit as comical, “his view that we need to be saved from a morbid descent into habit indicates a false dualism between life’s receptivity and habit’s resistance, which is often shared by those who see only one side of habit.”³⁴ Carlisle turns to another philosopher, the final figure I shall discuss here (namely, Kierkegaard), who shares in this mistaken proclivity.³⁵

As Kierkegaard cautions: “love is dissipated in the lukewarmness and indifference of habit.”³⁶ Beyond leading us away from love, he further holds that habit leads us astray of authentic faith.³⁷ As Carlisle explains, Kierkegaard laments the habitual mode in which Christianity is routinely practiced.³⁸ Opposed to the customary routine by which many Christians attend church, engage in prayer, and take communion, Kierkegaard sees habit as “an anxious attempt to repress freedom, to evade ethical

³¹ Ibid., 91.

³² See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900).

³³ Carlisle, *On Habit*, 91.

³⁴ Ibid., 94.

³⁵ It is worth noting that Carlisle has published extensively on Kierkegaard. Her books on Kierkegaard’s philosophy include: *Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Becoming: Movements and Positions* (2005), *Kierkegaard: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2006), *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling: A Reader’s Guide* (2010), and *Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard* (2019).

³⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 36.

³⁷ Carlisle, *On Habit*, 122.

³⁸ Ibid.

and spiritual responsibility.”³⁹ For him, the feeling of anxiety results directly from our freedom.⁴⁰ And again, Carlisle gestures at the similarities between compulsion and habit, so understood. Tying Kierkegaard’s view of habit directly to Freud’s account of repetition-compulsion, she argues that, although habit “is a way of dealing with this feeling [anxiety] . . . Kierkegaard certainly thinks that habit is pathological rather than therapeutic—and this insight would be developed by Freud, who found that the compulsion to repeat is a common symptom of neurosis.”⁴¹ The same apparent connection, I contend, could be made with respect to each of the forgoing figures. If habit represents a force of mindless, mechanistic repetition, what is left to distinguish habit, so understood, from a pathological form of compulsion?

My contribution to the present discussion—which concerns habit’s contested philosophical value—will take the following form: in Chapter Two, I offer a philosophical account of the meaning of compulsion, in order to distinguish it from the accounts of habit I develop in Chapter Three. Since recent discourse around compulsion is most apparent in medico-scientific disciplines, and since we have already seen Carlisle draw an explicit connection between negative appraisals of habit and Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of repetition-compulsion, I also discuss compulsion’s widespread contemporary purchase in the realms of mental and behavioral health. Even for the layperson, mere mention of ‘compulsion’ calls to mind its various associations in the contexts of addiction and dependency, as well as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). I begin Chapter Two with a preliminary discussion of some of the ordinary senses in which we typically employ the term and its various forms. The conceptual

³⁹ Ibid., 129.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

analysis I develop hinges on a distinction between two senses of ‘compulsion.’ Dating back to the Greek conception of *anankē*, the first sense, present in Plato but treated in greater depth by Aristotle, sees in compulsion an external force which impels an agent to act contrary to their own motivational states. The second sense, exemplified by Freud’s theory of a ‘compulsion to repeat,’ recasts the first sense in terms of a pathological force of repetition. I will quickly provide a brief preview of both senses of compulsion below.

Aristotle’s originary account of *anankē*, as presented in his ethical works, represents one of the earliest elaborations of the concept of compulsion. In both the *Eudemian Ethics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle understands compulsion (*anankē*) in a sense which is similar to force (*bia*). In his theory of action, force and compulsion feature as exculpatory conditions whose presence renders select cases of human action involuntary, and thus immune from blame. One acts under compulsion when, for example, one is carried off course by a strong wind.⁴² Actions that are performed owing to compulsion are exclusively those whose cause or origin lies external to both the rational and appetitive capacities of the agent in question. This means that compulsion, for Aristotle, cannot be integral to the agent. But in any case, there is nothing to suggest that compulsion in this sense must necessarily entail a force of repetition. Therefore, *anankē* is limited with respect to the extent to which it can help us theorize the pathological sense of compulsion to which I have previously alluded (and which is relevant to discussions of the nature of habit). Since habit involves repetition, the account of compulsion which

⁴² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 1729–1867 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1110a3–4.

is of greater interest for our present purposes is the second sense: namely, that which treats compulsion as a pathological force of repetition.

The widespread association of compulsion with behaviors that are repetitive in nature (not to mention pathological, unhealthy, or symptomatic of an underlying malady) largely developed as a result of Freud's proposal in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) of a force which he termed the "compulsion to repeat."⁴³ Repetition-compulsion—which Freud calls a "perpetual recurrence of the same thing," alluding to Nietzsche's discussion of eternal recurrence—names the tendency of patients who have undergone trauma to repeat key behaviors or replicate circumstances associated with the traumatic event.⁴⁴ A force "more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides," repetition-compulsion is identified not only in those whose behavior it renders passive, but also in those who manifest it actively, and who otherwise present no symptoms of neurosis.⁴⁵ The following are tendencies which Freud identifies as instances of the compulsion to repeat: the benefactor routinely abandoned by his apprentices; the lover whose relationships always meet the same ill-fated conclusion; the child who establishes habits of play.⁴⁶

It can be tempting to entertain the notion that all of our habits betray an underlying compulsion to repeat. That is, the thought goes, once we are habituated to some particular activity, we are rendered passive by the force of habit, and are fated to mindlessly repeat the action over and over again. Intuitively, the Freudian compulsion to repeat seems distinct from our ordinary, non-pathological habits, since it involves reconstructing traumatizing circumstances without

⁴³ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 2010), 24.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

resolution—thus causing us pain. It is this ceaseless repetition of the same that characterizes compulsion as a conservative force.⁴⁷ And as a conservative force, compulsion's defining characteristic is its resistance to change. But to what extent does such a picture capture the category of habit more generally? Are our non-pathological habits characterized by this same conservative force? Can habit, generally speaking, be reduced to a resistance to change, and nothing more?

Following my framing in Chapter Two of compulsion in terms of a conservative force, characterized by its resistance to change, I show that habit must always name not only *resistance*, but also a *receptivity* to change. Therefore, I turn in Chapter Three to accounts of habit which, unlike those surveyed at the start of the present chapter, do not reduce habit to a conservative force of repetition. I begin with Hume's identification of habit, or custom, as "the great guide of human life."⁴⁸ For Hume, habit represents a hypothesized faculty of human nature. It is responsible for supplying our expectations about future events: expectations, that is, in whose justification reason proves impotent. Beyond this role in managing expectations, habit amounts to a power or capacity about which Hume thinks we can say very little. That is, Hume's empiricism prevents him from speculating further on what exactly this hypothesized faculty is like. Nonetheless, consideration of Hume's account is still a worthwhile pursuit. It helps disabuse us of the mistaken belief, surveyed above, that habit is fated to forever stand in the way of philosophical reflection. Whereas, for instance, "Spinoza places habit on the wrong side of a divide between irrational prejudice and rational knowledge, Hume uses the concept of

⁴⁷ Elias Jabre, "Plus d'une loi: Reading Repetition Compulsion and Generalized Fetishism with Deleuze-Guattari and Derrida," trans. Thomas Clément Mercier, *The Undecidable Unconscious: A Journal of Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis* 7 (2020): 16.

⁴⁸ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 29.

habit to undermine this distinction.”⁴⁹ As I show, Ravaisson will later draw on this—undermining received distinctions is in fact one of the most significant strengths to which Ravaisson’s conception of habit lays claim.⁵⁰ Therefore, following my discussion of Hume, I conclude by turning to Ravaisson’s account of habit.

In opposition to those unable or unwilling to see in habit anything more than mindless, mechanistic repetition, Ravaisson’s conception of habit boldly announces itself as an ontological category capable of extending beyond mere compulsion, revealing itself as a source of genuine creativity. A synthesis of prior accounts both ancient and modern, Ravaisson’s view claims affiliation with a longstanding tradition in praise of habit stretching back to Aristotle.⁵¹ Ravaisson’s account, I argue, is characterized above all by its plasticity. That is, it retains the conceptual dynamism necessary to think habit in terms of not only constancy, but also change. It accounts for the stable habits which each of us long ago acquired—those which appear so natural as to escape our notice. But it also names the conditions of possibility for the acquisition of new habits and the overcoming of others: that is, those which we may, at present, find ourselves struggling either to adopt or overcome. It is in this sense that Ravaisson’s essay invites us to theorize habit in a sense capable of accounting for the conditions of possibility of both “grace and addiction.”⁵²

Jacques Derrida offers the most sustained critique of Ravaisson to date. In *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, Derrida offers a critique of Maine de Biran and Ravaisson in the context of a discussion of sensibility. Habit arises in this context—it becomes an issue—because, according to

⁴⁹ Carlisle, *On Habit*, 51.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁵¹ Malabou, “Addiction and Grace,” vii.

⁵² Ibid., xvii.

Derrida, both Maine de Biran and Ravaillon's theories of habit hinge on a problematic notion of touch.⁵³ Developing the claim levied separately by both Catherine Malabou and Clare Carlisle, I conclude by arguing, contra Derrida, that habit, in the sense elaborated by Ravaillon, represents an instance of the *pharmakon*: at once poison as well as cure.

⁵³ Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 137.

Chapter 2. The Philosophy of Compulsion

Framing Compulsion

‘Compulsion’ seems to name at once an external force which bears on us, and an uncanny, unknowable drive from within sabotaging our best efforts. Though derived from the Latin verb *compellō, compellere*, meaning ‘to drive’ or ‘to impel’—the Latin prefix *com-* means ‘together,’ and *pellō, pellere* is a verb which means ‘to push,’ ‘to drive,’ ‘to expel,’ and a variety of similar actions both literal and metaphorical—etymological origins alone, however, fail to provide a fully satisfying picture.¹ Arguments, works of artistic ingenuity, and bold ideas all belong to the set of phenomena we routinely label ‘compelling.’ We feel ‘compelled’ to behave in certain ways; we call certain responsibilities and commitments ‘compulsory’; we perform actions under ‘compulsion’ and lament the loss of control this entails. That is, we employ the language of compulsion all the time, in a variety of senses and in reference to a plurality of contexts. But how often do we stop to reflect not only on this concept in all its uses, but also on the degree to which it fits those contexts in which it is deployed? This chapter stands as a considered philosophical reflection on the meaning of compulsion. Though my aim is to provide a philosophical account, my reflections will frequently brush up against compulsion’s more concrete instantiations in other discursive contexts, especially medico-scientific discourse.

There are two closely related senses in which we use the term ‘compulsion.’ According to the first, compulsion simply names an external force, one which impels us to act in a manner which falls outside of our own motivational states. The second sense expresses compulsion in the same basic manner as the first, but ties it explicitly to a force of repetition. This sense of compulsion—compulsion

¹ *Collins Latin Concise Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (2016), s.vv. “compellō,” “pellō.”

understood in terms of a repetitive force—need not be entailed by the first sense. In the following two sections, I develop a philosophical account of compulsion which hinges on this distinction. I trace the first, more basic sense to Aristotle’s account of compulsion as *anankē*. I should clarify at the outset that Aristotle is not the first Greek philosopher to make use of a conception of compulsion as *anankē*. In Plato’s *Republic*, the philosopher-kings’ abiding duties are repeatedly characterized with reference to forms of the Greek word *anankē*, usually taken to mean ‘compulsory’ or ‘necessary.’² However, Plato does not provide a clear account of the precise meaning he thereby intends. Up to the present day, there endures a lively debate among scholars concerning just how strong a sense of ‘compulsion’ Plato intends in these passages.³ Rather than taking up the so-called ‘compulsion problem’ in Plato, I turn to Aristotle, where matters are less opaque.

The originary sense of compulsion as *anankē* only receives an adequately detailed treatment in Aristotle’s ethical texts, namely the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics*. The Aristotelian sense of ‘compulsion’ (*anankē*) is roughly synonymous with ‘force’ (*bia*). Both of these represent exculpatory conditions in Aristotle’s ontology of action. Accordingly, should the cause of an individual’s action lie externally (that is, external to the individual’s soul), then the action is determined to have been involuntary, and is thus immune from moral evaluation. Compulsion thus names a cause which lies external to the agent’s soul (taken to include both the soul’s rational and appetitive parts) which renders the action involuntary. It is in this sense that we commonly describe acting under

² Stephen Oppong Pehrah, “Re-examining the ‘Compulsion Problem’ in Plato’s *Republic*,” *Plato Journal* 22 (2021): 179.

³ Stephen Oppong Pehrah has recently argued that Plato would endorse the following definition of compulsion: “Compulsion involves forcing, coercing, or bending the will of someone to undertake something they will not do naturally or freely” (Ibid., 180). He acknowledges, however, that several opposing views on the ‘compulsion problem’ (particularly that of Julia Annas) present challenges for his proposed solution (Ibid.).

compulsion as cases in which the cause or origin of an agent's action lies external to "the person's own motivational states."⁴ Furthermore, it is this originary sense of compulsion as external force which permeates a wide array of later accounts, including many of those continuing to the present. For instance, early Islamic philosopher Al-Fārābī draws on both Plato and Aristotle in his own discussion of a 'compulsion to happiness.'⁵ It is in a similar vein that one will find Nietzsche linking the Apollonian drive with a 'compulsion to vision,' and the Dionysian drive with a 'compulsion to mania.'⁶ I will discuss some of these inheritances in greater detail following my discussion of Aristotle.

Consideration of this originary sense of compulsion as *anankē* is not, on its own, sufficient for my present purposes, however. Since my concern in this thesis lies in contributing to habit's conceptual clarity, and since I have chosen to go about this by illuminating the extent to which habit, properly understood, is distinct from compulsion, it is necessary that I distinguish compulsion's original sense as *anankē* from the second sense, which is more relevant for our present purposes. This second sense—namely, that sense in which compulsion is tied directly with a force of repetition—is the meaning which is of particular relevance to discussions of habit (since, of course, habit appears fundamentally linked to repetition). Therefore, following my discussion of compulsion as *anankē*, I turn to this second way of conceiving of compulsion, of which Freud's discussion of repetition-compulsion is exemplary. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud, drawing in particular on the work of both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, theorizes what he terms a 'compulsion to

⁴ Nick Heather, "Is the Concept of Compulsion Useful in the Explanation or Description of Addictive Behaviour and Experience?," *Addictive Behavioral Reports* 6 (2017): 17.

⁵ Michael J. Sweeney, "Philosophy and *Jihād*: Al-Fārābī on Compulsion to Happiness," *Review of Metaphysics* 60, no. 3 (2007): 543.

⁶ Peter Durno Murray, *Nietzsche and the Dionysian: A Compulsion to Ethics* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 232.

repeat.’ This compulsion to repeat, or repetition-compulsion, names a tendency according to which some individuals are overwhelmed by an impulse to serially repeat key traumatic encounters or the circumstances thereof. Crucially, the sense of ‘compulsion’ in Freudian ‘repetition-compulsion’ is not altogether distinct from the Aristotelian account of compulsion as *anankē*. It still represents, broadly speaking, a force lying outside one’s motivational states. However, following Freud’s explicit wedding of the force of compulsion with a pathological form of repetition, it has become standard to interpret the term ‘compulsion’ as in many cases implicitly tied to a force of repetition, even when the word ‘repetition’ does not explicitly appear alongside it. Nowhere is this more evident than in contemporary medico-scientific discourse, where this sense of compulsion enjoys widespread prevalence. We hear this implicit association between compulsion and repetition when we speak of ‘compulsions’ or ‘compulsive acts,’ for instance. While compulsion’s originary meaning as *anankē* is retained in this more recent, updated sense (initiated by Freud), the latter sense will develop the ‘force’ which compulsion entails as, more specifically, a force of repetition. Since this force of repetition need not be entailed by the original sense of compulsion as *anankē*, Freud’s account of repetition-compulsion evinces a break with what had come before. If compulsion is thought in terms of the metaphor of the pathway, Freud’s theory of repetition-compulsion announces a fork in the road: a divergence leading in two directions. One can either journey onward along the well-worn path of *anankē*, or one can instead take a detour down a newer pathway—a spiraling trail blazed by Freud. That is, after Freud, talk of ‘compulsion’ is no longer limited to the meaning present in Aristotle; instead, it can also signal a conception which insists on its repetitive and pathological character.

Before turning in the following sections to compulsion's two distinct senses—exemplified by the Aristotelian and Freudian accounts, respectively—allow me to hazard a few more observations in support of the claim that in addition to the first, more basic sense of compulsion (evinced in words like 'compel,' 'compelling,' and 'compulsory') there is an additional, distinct sense of compulsion tied explicitly to a force of repetition (evinced by medically-inflected discussions of 'compulsive acts' or 'compulsions'). As I have insisted, the clearest example of compulsion's widespread purchase today is in contemporary medico-scientific discourse, especially within the contexts of mental and behavioral health. In these contexts, 'compulsion' immediately calls to mind those living with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), with its attendant rituals and routines. Like similar mental and behavioral disorders, OCD's causal mechanisms remain poorly understood, though diagnostic criteria are fairly straightforward: "In order to determine if a patient meets DSM–5 diagnostic criteria for OCD, the patient must experience the presence of recurrent, unwanted, and intrusive thoughts (i.e., obsessions) and/or repetitive behaviors or rituals (i.e., compulsions) intended to relieve the fear, anxiety, and/or distress associated with obsessions."⁷ Notice that 'compulsion,' here, is explicitly linked with repetition. Fearing widespread stigma, many of those suffering with OCD delay seeking treatment, in some cases indefinitely.⁸ On the other hand, OCD's seriousness—the very real suffering of those living with OCD—has been routinely trivialized, resulting in part from a widespread tendency

⁷ Amy M. Rapp et al., "Evidence-Based Assessment of Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder," *Journal of Central Nervous System Disease* 8 (2016): 14.

⁸ See Marie Ociskova et al., "Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Stigmatization," *Activitas Nervosa Superior Rediviva* 35, no. 1–2 (2013): 19. See also Kimberly Glazier et al., "Stigma and Shame as Barriers to Treatment for Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders," *Journal of Depression and Anxiety* 4, no. 3 (2015): 1.

for many without OCD to casually attribute their own minor quirks to the disorder.⁹ At best these joking attributions are self-deprecating barbs. At worst they represent irresponsible and myopic excesses of a recent self-diagnosis fad. The sense of compulsion at play in OCD dates back at least to Freud's theory of repetition-compulsion, which, again, I treat much more fully in a later section.

In fact, some researchers working in mental and behavioral health fields today acknowledge that discussions of compulsion date back, ultimately, to Aristotle.¹⁰ For example, clinical psychologist Nick Heather has written extensively on compulsion, intimately tied as it is to discussions around addiction and dependency. Compulsion, he argues, is the linchpin on which the disease model of addiction hinges.¹¹ According to this model, "it is the compulsive nature of addictive behaviour that distinguishes it from non-addictive behaviour. To say that an addict's behaviour is compulsive is to say, in respect of their addiction, that they are not free to behave other than they do; they have no choice in the matter or, at least, their ability to choose is severely constrained by the effects of their disease of addiction."¹² Heather wrestles with the question of whether or not clinicians' lack of clarity or understanding of what they mean by 'compulsion' (and what sorts of causal and biological mechanisms or processes are involved) may in fact be frustrating prospects for future progress in treating addiction. Discussions of compulsion, he acknowledges, stretch back to antiquity. In reference to a similarly oriented study by G. Lynn Stephens and George Graham (2009), Heather mentions that

⁹ Patrick Robinson et al., "Measuring Attitudes Towards Mental Health Using Social Media: Investigating Stigma and Trivialization," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 54 (2019): 52.

¹⁰ See Nick Heather, "Is the Concept of Compulsion Useful?" See also G. Lynn Stephens and George Graham, "An Addictive Lesson: A Case Study in Psychiatry as Cognitive Neuroscience" (2009).

¹¹ Nick Heather, "Is the Concept of Compulsion Useful?," 15.

¹² Ibid.

conceptions of compulsion appear as far back as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹³ Though Heather acknowledges that a basic incompatibility distinguishes standard medico-scientific definitions of compulsion from Aristotle's early account of *anankē*, it may nonetheless seem surprising that researchers in these fields are even aware of this connection in the first place.¹⁴ I take this as further evidence of the originary nature of Aristotle's account of compulsion as *anankē*. Without further ado, it is to this originary account that I now turn.

Aristotle on Compulsion (*Anankē*)

Aristotle's treatment of compulsion, as mentioned above, appears in the ethical works, namely the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics*.¹⁵ Scholarly discussion surrounding the sense of compulsion appearing in these ethical tracts has mainly focused on its role in distinguishing voluntary from involuntary action. It is here that Aristotle discusses what counts as force (*bia*) and compulsion (*anankē*), and how these conditions are to be considered in the moral evaluation of actions. Below, I give this distinction due consideration, taking into account what it motivates within his argument, as well as what it indicates about his overriding priorities. To approach a more complete account of *anankē*, I include a discussion of the ends toward which his invocation of this concept is directed—those ends being justice at the scale of the polis.

In *NE*, Aristotle's account of compulsion appears within a broader discussion of action. He opens the discussion in *NE* Book III with the following set of claims:

Since excellence is concerned with passions and actions, and on voluntary passions and actions praise and blame are bestowed, on those that are involuntary forgiveness, and sometimes also

¹³ See Stephens and Graham, "An Addictive Lesson."

¹⁴ Heather, "Is the Concept of Compulsion Useful?," 21.

¹⁵ Hereafter abbreviated *NE* and *EE*, respectively.

pity, to distinguish the voluntary and the involuntary is presumably necessary for those who are studying excellence and useful also for legislators with a view to the assigning both of honours and of punishments.¹⁶

For Aristotle, virtuous living requires that one develop and embody key moral virtues while simultaneously avoiding certain vices. Virtuous activity can invite praise, while vices often entail blame. In determining which actions call for moral evaluation, Aristotle draws a formal distinction between voluntary and involuntary action. For an action to be either praiseworthy or blameworthy, it must have been performed voluntarily; whereas, if the action was performed involuntarily, then it may be deserving of sympathy or even pity. The significance of this distinction is twofold. On the one hand, a student of ethics must be able to distinguish the voluntary from the involuntary in order to differentiate between actions which either do or do not invite moral valuation. On the other hand, in order for the state to issue punishments properly, so too must its agents be able to separate the voluntary from the involuntary, since blameworthiness hinges on such a distinction. This relationship between the individual student of ethics and legal practice at the scale of the polis is crucial for Aristotle, so I will return to it later.

The involuntary, for Aristotle, consists in those actions “which take place under compulsion or owing to ignorance.”¹⁷ Contrastingly, “the voluntary would seem to be that of which the moving principle is in the agent himself.”¹⁸ Thus, if the cause of an action originates within the soul, then the action must be voluntary. This holds even if the action originates not in the rational part of the soul, but instead in the appetitive part. So long as its origin can be located internally, the action is treated as

¹⁶ Aristotle, *NE*, 1109b30–34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1109b35–1110a1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1111a23–24.

voluntary (barring, of course, cases in which the action is performed owing to ignorance of the particulars). The voluntary is thus determined negatively by giving exculpatory conditions which, should one or more apply, render an action involuntary. These include cases in which the action is performed owing to force, compulsion, or ignorance. Barring these cases, the action is taken to be voluntary. Setting aside cases of ignorance, what is it that distinguishes force (*bia*) and compulsion (*anankē*)? Some scholars treat them as basically synonymous.¹⁹ Others treat force and compulsion as distinct exculpatory conditions.²⁰ The story only becomes more complex when one considers the differences on these points between *NE* and *EE*.²¹ The discussion of action in *EE* presents force and compulsion as clear exculpatory conditions. Matters are less clear in the *NE* discussion of action, to which we return momentarily.

Let us pause for a moment to reflect on the language we use to express these sorts of cases. Notice that in the preceding discussion, I have frequently retained use of the active voice in my forgoing descriptions of involuntary action. I do this even in spite of the fact that the very notion of involuntariness serves to trouble any clear or obvious sense in which it is, in truth, the agent who is acting. It may be more useful to think of at least some involuntary actions as cases in which the agent—rather than acting—is acted upon. This seems especially true in more obvious cases of force, like the example Aristotle gives of someone having been “carried somewhere by a wind, or by men who

¹⁹ See Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (1991). See also Robert Heinaman, “Compulsion and Voluntary Action in the *Eudemian Ethics*” (1988). See also Karen Margrethe Nielsen, “Dirtying Aristotle’s Hands? Aristotle’s Analysis of ‘Mixed Acts’ in the *Nicomachean Ethics* III, 1” (2007).

²⁰ See Béatrice Lienemann, “Aristotle’s Treatment of Force and Compulsion as Exculpatory Conditions for Moral Responsibility” (2013).

²¹ Scholars generally take *EE* to have been written first, since it presents several of Aristotle’s ideas in less thoroughly developed fashion. See, for instance, Robert Heinaman, “Compulsion and Voluntary Action in the *Eudemian Ethics*,” *Noûs* 22, no. 2 (1988), 277.

had him in their power.”²² The individual who is carried away by a strong wind seems passive in the situation, rather than active. As Aristotle explains: “that is compulsory of which the moving principle is outside, being a principle in which nothing is contributed by the person who acts or is acted upon.”²³ If this is true, then it seems inappropriate to describe the individual as acting at all in at least some of these cases.

According to Robert Heinaman, in *EE* those cases which count as compulsion are those in which “an external agent causes an object to move or rest in a way contrary to the natural internal impulse . . . of the object.”²⁴ Though the object in question can be either living or inanimate, “while the internal origin in inanimate objects and non-human animals is single, human beings possess two such origins: appetite . . . and reason.”²⁵ In order for an agent to act under compulsion, the cause of the action must lie external to both of these origins: namely, the appetitive and rational parts of the soul. If it is the appetites which drive an agent to act, even if the appetites stand in conflict with reason, then the cause of the action still lies internally. It would thus be incorrect to suggest that one is acting under compulsion when one’s appetites overwhelm one’s rational capacities. This is exemplified in the case of the incontinent person:

But in the continent and the incontinent it is the present internal tendency that leads them, for they have both tendencies. So that neither acts on compulsion nor by force, but, as far at least as the above goes, voluntarily. For the external moving principle, that hinders or moves in opposition to the internal tendency, is what we call necessity, e.g. when we strike someone with

²² Aristotle, *NE*, 1110a3–4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1110a1–3.

²⁴ Heinaman, “Compulsion and Voluntary Action,” 269.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

the hand of one whose wish and appetite alike resist; but when the principle is from within, there is no force.²⁶

Aristotle thus denies the incontinent person's claim to having acted under compulsion. That is, even if an agent acts contrary to reason, should the cause stem from the appetitive part of the soul, it remains nonetheless internal. The action, by extension, remains nonetheless voluntary.

According to Béatrice Lienemann's reading, Aristotle only introduces compulsion within his theory of action in order to motivate a third category of 'mixed actions.'²⁷ Though they appear in *NE*, mixed actions are absent in *EE*. They have nonetheless received much scholarly attention. Karen Margrethe Nielsen argues that they do not represent a legitimate category in Aristotle's ontology of action.²⁸ In these actions, "the mixture is not a mixture of good and bad, right and wrong, advantageous or disadvantageous," but are instead called mixed "insofar as they seem both voluntary and involuntary."²⁹ Aristotle gives as an example "the throwing of goods overboard in a storm" performed by a ship captain in order to secure safe passage for a ship and its crew.³⁰ Thus, an action is considered mixed if performed under certain extreme circumstances, provided the agent would never ordinarily wish to perform such an action. But since the agent in question nonetheless retains the option either to perform the action or to refrain and suffer the consequences, Aristotle hints that for the most part, these cases should simply be taken to represent voluntary action. This leads Nielsen to

²⁶ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 1922–1981 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1224b10–15.

²⁷ Béatrice Lienemann, "Aristotle's Treatment of Force and Compulsion as Exculpatory Conditions for Moral Responsibility," *Center for Hellenic Studies Research Bulletin* 2, no. 1 (2013).

²⁸ Karen Margrethe Nielsen, "Dirtying Aristotle's Hands? Aristotle's Analysis of 'Mixed Acts' in the *Nicomachean Ethics* III, 1," *Phronesis* 52, no. 3 (2007): 270.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 273.

³⁰ Aristotle, *NE*, 1110a8–9.

conclude that “‘mixed act’ is a provisional label attached to coerced acts before the puzzle about their true nature is sorted out.”³¹ ‘True nature,’ then, will likely turn out to designate voluntariness. This interpretation can count as evidence in its favor the fact that Aristotle draws the relevant discussions to a close by gesturing at the voluntariness of each case, before promptly moving to a new topic.

However, this is not the only way scholars have interpreted these passages. In accounting for the ambiguity of mixed acts, Lienemann emphasizes that Aristotle “refuses to give clear-cut answers, since he had argued before that every action needs to be evaluated with regard to its specific circumstances and it is not possible to offer definite and universally valid answers with regard to the voluntariness of certain action types.”³² One should always bear in mind Aristotle’s insistence that ethics is imperfect, and that the degree of precision one seeks should always be appropriate to the nature of the subject matter.³³ Lienemann argues that the most consistent option would lie in labeling as involuntary any action performed due to an agent’s having been compelled by an irresistible force, namely one which overwhelms one’s rational capacities. Such a proposal, however, would seem to place Lienemann squarely at odds with Aristotle’s stated views.

So far, I have surveyed existing scholarship in search of the meaning of Aristotle’s sense of compulsion as *anankē*. Broadly speaking, the conception which we inherit from the above scholarly discussions is the following: for Aristotle, human action is performed under compulsion if and only if the cause of an action lies external to both one’s appetitive and rational capacities. Any discussion of compulsion thus hinges on this boundary between that which is internal and that which is external.

³¹ Nielsen, “Dirtying Aristotle’s Hands?,” 280.

³² Lienemann, “Aristotle’s Treatment of Force and Compulsion.”

³³ In *NE* Book I, Aristotle states: “for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits” (1094b23–25).

Notice that any discussion of compulsion will rely on the assumption that such a boundary exists. The contention does not lie with whether or not such a boundary exists in principle, but rather with where precisely this boundary is to be drawn. Aristotle draws the boundary in such a way as to include both appetitive desire and rationality within the sphere of the internal. Thus, acting in accordance with appetitive desire, even if it conflicts with or overrides one's rational capacities, is insufficient for Aristotle's conception of compulsion. Why is it, we might ask, that Aristotle chooses to draw the boundary in this manner? Why must acts performed owing to compulsion locate their origin external to both the rational *and* the appetitive parts of the soul? That is, why do cases of overly strong appetitive desire fail to constitute bona fide compulsion? One reason for this may very well stem from the emphasis he places on ethics being subservient to politics. More specifically, his broader aim—justice at the scale of the polis—may oblige him to this more restricted view.

First, why is it that justice and the proper functioning of the polis constitute broader aims? While justice is a virtue, it is not simply one among a long list of others. Justice is “complete excellence in its fullest sense, because it is the actual exercise of complete excellence. It is complete because he who possesses it can exercise his excellence towards others too and not merely by himself.”³⁴ Thus, its significance lies in the fact that its concerns extend beyond the lone individual. To put this more directly, we might wonder if Aristotle's concern lies in the potentially negative political ramifications at stake in excusing individuals' otherwise unjust actions on account of their having arisen from the appetitive part of the soul. Recall the example of the incontinent person discussed earlier. That is,

³⁴ Aristotle, *EE*, 1129b30–33.

Aristotle is plainly unwilling to allow for the incontinent person's actions to have been performed under compulsion.³⁵

Aristotle, then, is concerned not only with the individual student of ethics, but also with the political harmony of the polis. As Rachana Kamtekar argues concerning *NE* Book IX, "law is the best means of the formulation of character. Why law? Aristotle explains that right habits are not easy for the majority of the young (1179b31–34), and the law's prescriptions combine reasoning with compulsion without incurring resentment."³⁶ In fact, Aristotle hints at this point as early as *NE* Book I, where he explains:

For even if the end is the same for a single man and for a state, that of the state seems at all events something greater and more complete both to attain and to preserve; for though it is worth while to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for city-states. These, then, are the ends at which our inquiry, being concerned with politics, aims.³⁷

Beyond recalling Aristotle's dual concern both for the individual student of ethics as well as for those legislators tasked with assigning rewards and punishments, the above passage goes further by establishing that the concerns of the polis take priority over the concerns of the individual. This overriding focus, I contend, helps account for the manner in which Aristotle proposes to draw the boundary between that which is—with respect to compulsion—considered internal versus external to the soul.

³⁵ We might wonder, for instance, what would result if such a maxim of conduct were universalized.

³⁶ Rachana Kamtekar, "The Relationship Between Aristotle's Ethical and Political Discourses," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Ronald Polansky, 370–382 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 370.

³⁷ Aristotle, *NE*, 1094b7–12.

In the above discussion, I considered Aristotle's treatment of compulsion as *anankē* presented in his related reflections on action and justice. Most scholars who discuss compulsion in Aristotle do so in the context of his distinguishing voluntary and involuntary action. What results from a study of Aristotle's thought on compulsion and action, hastened on as it is by the deserved attention it has received in the philosophical literature, is a strikingly clear image of compulsion.³⁸ Namely, compulsion as *anankē* names an action whose origin or cause lies external to both the rational and appetitive capacities of the agent in question. This sense of compulsion persists to varying degrees in our common recourse to words like 'compel,' 'compelling,' and 'compulsory.' Rather than framing this sense of compulsion in terms borrowed from the tripartite soul (words like 'reason' and 'appetite'), today we are more likely to characterize compulsory actions as those which remove "control of behaviour from the person's own motivational states."³⁹ Quite often, then, our common recourse to the language of 'compulsion' appears to maintain a fidelity to the original spirit of Aristotle's discussion of *anankē*. As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, in the more than two thousand ensuing years of philosophical engagement following Plato and Aristotle, a wide variety of figures have availed themselves of notions of compulsion traceable to the ancient Greek conception of *anankē*. I have already gestured at examples including Al-Fārābī and Nietzsche, and although there are a number of other cases from which one could draw, I will discuss just one additional (though expansive) tradition which has enjoyed frequent recourse to compulsion's terminology.

³⁸ Much more clear, I reiterate, than the opaque references to *anankē* which appear in Plato's *Republic*.

³⁹ Heather, "Is the Concept of Compulsion Useful?," 17.

Figures in the long tradition of radical social and political critique have rarely shied away from invoking the theme of compulsion in their polemics. As Marx argues in the *Grundrisse*, “the objective basis of the whole of the system of production, already in itself implies compulsion over the individual.”⁴⁰ For the unpropertied masses, so the argument goes, the only alternative to wage labor is starvation. In the spirit of this critique, rather than viewing employment as a voluntary contract between free individuals, wage labor appears instead as though performed under compulsion. Marxists up to the present day have continued, in this spirit, to describe forms of economic activity in the spheres of both production and exchange as compulsory in nature. For example, Ernest Mandel’s summaries of Marxist philosophy include descriptions of both economic and non-economic forms of compulsion, drawn from Marx’s own writings.⁴¹ January 2023 saw the publication in English of *Mute Compulsion*, a new retelling of Marx’s critique of political economy.⁴² The title refers to a decisive passage in volume one of *Capital* in which Marx writes: “The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker.”⁴³ Marxist deployments of compulsion thus use it in a sense quite like that of Aristotle: as a force bearing on us from outside of our own motivational states.

This observation can be spelled out more concretely, even if we limit our analysis purely to consideration of the early Marx. Take, for example, Marx’s treatment of alienation in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. According to Marx’s characterization, labor is something which is

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993), 248.

⁴¹ Ernest Mandel, *An Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 46–47.

⁴² See Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital* (2023).

⁴³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 899.

involuntary, coercive, and performed in service of needs which are external, rather than internal, to the individual laborer. Labor, that is, is actually *coerced* labor.⁴⁴ His characterization of labor as involuntary, forced, coerced, and in service of ends external to those of the worker calls to mind Aristotle's discussion of voluntary and involuntary action in *NE*. Marx notices that the cause of the worker's labor is not the satisfaction of some want, need, or desire internal to the worker. Laboring is thus "not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it."⁴⁵ Since the cause or originating principle of labor lies external to the laborer, Marx argues, the laborer's actions—the activity of labor—"is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labor*."⁴⁶ The major difference here is that, by cause, Marx has in mind final causality (that is, the end or purpose toward which something is ultimately directed), whereas, in his discussion of action and compulsion in *NE*, Aristotle has in mind efficient causality (the agent or force that initiates an action or change).

To reiterate, the primary aim of this thesis lies in distinguishing between habit, properly understood, and the sense of compulsion to which, as Carlisle shows, a great many figures in the history of Western philosophy have mistakenly reduced habit. The present chapter is concerned with developing the resources necessary to think compulsion apart and distinct from habit. The major ingredient missing from the forgoing discussion of compulsion, however, is repetition. The meaning of compulsion relevant to discussions of habit is what I have referred to as a more recent, 'second sense' of compulsion—one which is distinct from earlier conceptions of *anankē*, in light of its updated association with repetition. That is, the meaning of compulsion which I am after is the one which

⁴⁴ In fact, this was a commonly held view in the radical French socialist tradition of Marx's time, a tradition with whose representative figures Marx's writings are often in dialogue, even if he cites them explicitly with much less frequency.

⁴⁵ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1988), 74.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

includes this crucial update, best exemplified by Freud's theory of repetition-compulsion. Freud's account is emblematic of compulsion's association with not only force (as in Aristotle), but a force of repetition. It is only in light of this latter sense that compulsion appears more clearly as a characteristically conservative force—that is, a force of repetition—which is resistant to change. This is the sense of compulsion to which, as we saw in Chapter One, figures ranging from Descartes to Bergson have tended to reduce habit. Therefore, I turn in the following section to Freud's account of a 'compulsion to repeat,' in order to supply this hitherto missing component.

Freud on Repetition-Compulsion

It is Freud's famed account which is perhaps most responsible for compulsion's frequent association with repetition, and, relatedly, much of its conceptual opacity. It is also the account responsible for compulsion's widespread medico-scientific relevance. This should not be surprising, since Freud's account is—by his own lights—more properly medico-scientific than philosophical in nature. In addition to Freud's conception of a 'compulsion to repeat,' or 'repetition-compulsion,' this section touches on themes including drive theory, the libido, and the death drive, as these component parts help triangulate Freud's sense of compulsion within the context of his broader constellation of thought. Otherwise, one runs the risk of developing a kind of tunnel vision which, so focused on the sole character of repetition-compulsion, obscures its complexities through neglect of the overarching system.⁴⁷ Additionally, I develop Freud's account with reference to correlate ideas in the writings of both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, whose immense influence is clear despite Freud's scant

⁴⁷ Acknowledging the clear impossibility of providing a satisfactory account of Freud's entire oeuvre here, I have exercised restraint in selecting only those components of Freud's system which are strictly speaking necessary for an adequate treatment of repetition-compulsion.

acknowledgement. This aids in keeping my discussion circumscribed as much as possible within the order of the philosophical.

Freudian psychoanalysis represents a set of theories intended to shed light on the complexities of human nature, and it does so with reference to certain innate drives. Freud was by no means the first to conceive of human nature in these terms. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Nietzsche advocates a rethinking of the soul in terms of “such conceptions as ‘mortal soul,’ and ‘soul as subjective multiplicity,’ and ‘soul as social structure of the drives and affects.’”⁴⁸ Such views, which characterize human nature as constituted by conflicting drives, were thus already entrenched in European intellectual life by the time Freud claimed to have himself arrived at these same conclusions.⁴⁹ Officially, Freud claimed never to have seriously read Nietzsche, nor the latter’s estimable teacher, Schopenhauer, until late in life.⁵⁰ Eva Cybulska, however, cautions that the ambivalent regard in which Freud claimed to hold these figures should invite significant doubt. She argues that Freud’s many “contradictory statements as to the origin of his ideas undermine their truthfulness.”⁵¹ Lacking the space either to explore all of these statements in detail, nor to subject Freud to the analyst’s couch, interested parties need only consult Cybulska’s study. Suffice it to say that, though many of the resonances one detects

⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), 20.

⁴⁹ As with many key psychoanalytic insights, one finds in Freud’s theory of drives the crystallization of existing ideas, though having undergone significant development under his care. Paying heed to these inheritances aids one in articulating an account of the psychoanalytic tradition which is faithful not only to Freud, but also to the broader intellectual context out of which it emerged.

⁵⁰ Beyond consideration of the likely influence of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche on Freud’s theories, so too should one emphasize Nietzsche’s profound respect for Schopenhauer. Though Nietzsche’s life-affirming philosophy would ultimately find itself at odds with Schopenhauer’s brand of nihilism, the former’s extended essay on the latter can at times appear as a veritable love letter. See Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator” (1874).

⁵¹ Eva Cybulska, “Freud’s Burden of Debt to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer,” *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 15, no. 2 (2015): 11.

between these three thinkers' ideas may be due primarily to confluence, the similarities are too detailed and precise to warrant ruling out altogether the possibility of direct influence. Though it is Freud's account of repetition-compulsion which I take to be exemplary of the shift from thinking about compulsion strictly as *anankē* to thinking compulsion in terms of a conservative force (that is, a force of repetition), Freud develops his account of repetition-compulsion with frequent reference to these earlier figures (Schopenhauer and Nietzsche). While Freud is the figure exemplary of the updated sense of compulsion, I want to resist reducing this shift entirely to a novelty on the part of Freud alone, and instead trace this shift as emerging out of a broader trend: a trend associated with (but not entirely reducible to) Freud.

Chief among those drives for which Freud made his name is the 'libido,' or 'sex drive.' Frequently conflated with the broader, more general category of 'eros' (that is, 'life force'), the libido, as Freud would eventually acknowledge, was first theorized by Schopenhauer. In the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation* (published in 1844, over a decade before Freud's birth), Schopenhauer had already cast human sexuality in an exalted causal role:

All this corresponds to the vital role played by sexual relations in the human world; they are the invisible focal point of all our doings and dealings, and they peep through in spite of all the veils thrown over them. They are the cause of wars and the goal of peace, the grounds for seriousness and the aim of jokes, an inexhaustible source of witticisms, the key to all insinuations, and the meaning of all secret hints, unspoken propositions and stolen glances.⁵²

For Schopenhauer, humans are guided in their behavior not least by this sexual instinct. The purpose toward which the sexual instinct is directed, he claims, is the continuation of the species through

⁵² Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, trans. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 529.

reproduction. Therefore, particular individuals' conscious or stated reasons for engaging in sexual activity are beside the point. Under his view, "the impulse to sexual intercourse is at the very core of our being, as an instinct which is the most direct and powerful manifestation of will to life in our bodies."⁵³ All functions of the body are thus to be explained in terms of this 'will to life.' In a rather humorous passage, Schopenhauer argues that the "teeth, throat and intestines are objectified hunger; the genitals are objectified sex drive; prehensile hands and swift feet correspond to the more indirect strivings of the will they present."⁵⁴ One invariably finds both of these ideas—that of the sex instinct (libido) as well as the more general will to life (eros)—present in Freudian psychoanalysis; they are among its founding principles.⁵⁵

I now turn to consider Freud's seminal 1920 essay, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.⁵⁶ It is in this text that Freud unveils his theory of a 'compulsion to repeat.' It is a matter of debate whether or not the developments to Freud's theory introduced in *BPP* represent a radical break with what had come before. Intellectual historian and biographer Peter Gay refers to the updates made to drive theory in the text as both an "important theoretical revision" and a "turning point in psychoanalytic theory."⁵⁷ Gregory Zilboorg's introduction to the same text, however, offers an opposing view. Zilboorg writes:

⁵³ Christopher Janaway, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 60.

⁵⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 133.

⁵⁵ Though rooted in a certain venerable tradition, Freud's own articulation of the sexual instinct was met with much criticism. It precipitated a split in the psychoanalytic milieu, and led to the expulsion of Carl Jung, the ally-turned-critic unwilling to adopt some of Freud's more controversial views—the Oedipal complex in particular (See Cybulska, "Freud's Burden of Debt," 4). As Cybulska describes, "when his theory of libido met severe criticism (not least by Jung), Freud called upon Schopenhauer as an ally," eventually making explicit reference to the latter's by now well established view of sexuality (Ibid.). This would become a characteristic move in Freud's defensive arsenal.

⁵⁶ Hereafter abbreviated *BPP*.

⁵⁷ Peter Gay, "Freud: A Brief Life," preface to Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey, ix–xxiii (New York: Norton, 1989), xxiii.

As a matter of cold fact, the book is an important contribution, a thrust forward in the growth of Freudian thought; but if one reads it carefully one will easily see that Freud *did not* change his mind, and that *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* did not overthrow any old psychoanalytic regime nor did it establish any new one. It was not even a small village revolution; it was and is a landmark of further development and a consolidation of the older pathways. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is what it says; it goes a little further beyond, but it does not abandon whatever preceded it.⁵⁸

In the text, Freud theorizes a force opposed to eros, which he terms the ‘death drive.’ This instinctual and unconscious tendency toward harmful and destructive behaviors operates beyond and independent of the pleasure principle. This ‘pleasure principle,’ namely the tendency of the psyche to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, had been and would continue to be a central tenet of psychoanalytic doctrine.

And again, Freud’s formulation of the death drive bears certain similarities with Schopenhauer’s reflections on death:

Dying is certainly to be seen as the true purpose of life: in the moment of death, everything is decided that was only prepared and introduced by the whole course of life. Death is the result, the *résumé* of life, or the total sum expressing in a single stroke the whole lesson that life has given us sporadically and piecemeal: and the lesson is this, that the whole of striving, the appearance of which is life, was futile, in vain, and contradictory, and it is a redemption to be returned from it.⁵⁹

After announcing this new concept, the death drive, and the means by which he had arrived at it (along with its relationship to the pleasure principle), Freud makes explicit reference to the abiding conceptual filiation between himself and Schopenhauer. He writes: “There is something else, at any rate, that we cannot remain blind to. We have unwittingly steered our course into the harbour of Schopenhauer’s

⁵⁸ Gregory Zilboorg, introduction to Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey, xxv–xxxv (New York: Norton, 1989), xxxi.

⁵⁹ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, 653.

philosophy. For him death is the ‘true result and to that extent the purpose of life,’ while the sexual instinct is the embodiment of the will to live.”⁶⁰ Having laid the necessary groundwork, we now return to Freud’s account of repetition-compulsion. Appearing in *BPP* is Freud’s extended discussion of what he terms a ‘compulsion to repeat,’ which is meant to explain the observed tendency for patients to repeat traumatic events or the characteristics thereof. It is, he speculates, the “compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle.”⁶¹ Commentators have here too taken note of a seeming similarity with Nietzsche’s famous though confounding discussion of eternal recurrence. Nietzsche’s cryptic passage from *The Gay Science* begins as follows:

The greatest weight.—What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, a speck of dust!”⁶²

Freud makes casual reference to Nietzsche when he refers to the compulsion to repeat as the “perpetual recurrence of the same thing.”⁶³ Freud’s discussion of repetition-compulsion appears first in the context of a child patient in whom he noticed a propensity to repeat serially a particularly vexing

⁶⁰ Freud, *BPP*, 59–60. It remains a matter of debate whether or not the Freudian death drive represents a fidelity to Schopenhauer. According to Robert Grimwade’s reading, for Schopenhauer, “the will does not aim at death. It aims at a living death. It is not a death drive” [Robert Grimwade, “Freud’s Philosophical Inheritance: Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 99, no. 3 (June 2012): 369]. If this is the case, then what ought one to make of Freud’s ambivalent relationship with his predecessors: one in which he at once fails to acknowledge what are clear appropriations, while also claiming a filiation on points which, on closer inspection, reveal themselves to be those of divergence rather than agreement. Grimwade’s answer is that Freud “disavows both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer by inheriting their concepts and giving revisionist readings of their philosophies that seem to annihilate all trace of influence while simultaneously invoking the authority of their faded signatures” (Ibid., 361).

⁶¹ Freud, *BPP*, 24.

⁶² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 273.

⁶³ Freud, *BPP*, 23.

pattern of behavior.⁶⁴ The child exhibited a seeming compulsion to throw his toys and other objects across the room, causing them to disappear, while simultaneously crying out. Freud diagnoses the situation as follows: the child, in a seeming effort to reconcile the pain of being separated from his mother throughout the day, developed a habit of staging her disappearance by causing his toys to disappear in a repetitive fashion. Freud explains that while “at the outset he was in a *passive* situation—he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part.”⁶⁵ Compulsion, in the Freudian sense of repetition-compulsion, is what I characterize as a conservative force. That is, of the two senses of compulsion to which I refer at the outset of the present chapter, the sense of compulsion of which Freud’s theory is exemplary is that which names a force of repetition: that is, a force which ceaselessly reproduces the same. A force which reproduces the same is one which is characterized by constancy, a resistance to change. That it is characteristically resistant to change is what I mean when I label it ‘conservative.’ It is clear that Freud’s account of compulsion, by his own lights, can be accurately characterized in terms of the above description; as we have seen, Freud—alluding to Nietzsche’s notion of eternal recurrence—characterizes repetition-compulsion as a ‘perpetual recurrence of the same thing.’ And to reiterate, the other sense of compulsion (namely, the more originary sense of compulsion as *anankē*—of which Aristotle’s account is exemplary), need not be characterized in this same light, since it need not entail a force of repetition.

⁶⁴ This young patient, the player of the ‘Fort-Da’ game, was none other than Freud’s own grandson, Ernst.

⁶⁵ Freud, *BPP*, 15.

For the remainder of this thesis, the sense of compulsion to which I refer will be the sense inaugurated by Freud. In what remains of this chapter, I will further motivate my claim that compulsion (in this Freudian sense) names a conservative force, characteristically resistant to change. It is something like this sense of ‘compulsion,’ then, with which I think the figures surveyed in Chapter One (Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, and others) have tended to mistakenly identify ‘habit.’ They are mistaken in this identification because habit, properly understood, is irreducible to a merely conservative force. In the following chapter, Chapter Three, I present the accounts of habit offered by both Hume and Ravaillon, which provide good reasons to think that this is so: namely, that habit is irreducible to compulsion. But first, allow me to offer further evidence in support of the claim that compulsion represents a conservative force, before I turn in the next chapter to argue that habit is ultimately irreducible to such a force.

Thinkers of the political enact their own form of repetition-compulsion, returning again and again over the last century to Freud’s oeuvre in an attempt to explain why, for instance, the masses have failed to achieve the kinds of revolutions or reforms once thought not only possible, but inevitable. This despite the curious role of politics in Freud’s texts. The most overtly political text of Freud’s corpus, *Civilization and its Discontents*, is rife with assertions that in the philosophical register border on the pessimistic, while in the political register betray a conservative complacency. Take for example Freud’s insistence that those who imagine themselves capable of changing the world are not only delusional, but destined to “as a rule attain nothing.”⁶⁶ Even leaving such provocations aside, there are more pointed reasons to be skeptical about the political possibilities afforded by psychoanalytic forces

⁶⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 2010), 51.

of repetition. According to Elias Jabre: “Repetition compulsion describes the movement of the [Oedipal] law, which returns through the play of repetition.”⁶⁷ As Jabre describes, historically, the attempt on the part of psychoanalysis to account for the behavior of the Oedipal law in terms of repetition has, in the political register, entailed a political conservatism:

Since its inception, psychoanalytic theory has attempted to rethink what puts the “subject” in motion by theorizing a force of repetition which exceeds representation: the Oedipal law. Therefore, it might seem counterintuitive to resort to psychoanalysis in order to consider the modalities of social and political change. Shouldn’t we assume that this law, because it is described as a force of *repetition*, is by necessity a *conservative* force, and that it results in defining social movements in the form of a process of reproduction? It is true that psychoanalysis also strived to account for phenomena of *transgression*; but transgression was also related to a force of repetition: the death drive or the repetition compulsion . . .⁶⁸

Therapeutic treatment involves helping patients understand how their behaviors are conditioned by the repetitive force which the Oedipal law represents. It would thus be a mistake to think that successful treatment impedes these forces of repetition. For although the analyst’s efforts are indeed aimed at curing those symptoms whose repetition causes the analysand to suffer, the forces which give rise to them are theorized as largely static and unchanging laws of human behavior. At best, “the work of the analyst consists in helping the subject to find their place before the Oedipal law by untangling their neuroses, and by curing correlated symptoms.”⁶⁹ But the ‘Oedipal law’ remains, which is to say that the repetitive forces undergirding and structuring human experience are far from having been overcome.

Though repetition-compulsion entails, for Freud, the ‘perpetual recurrence of the same,’ Rebecca Comay argues that what this repetition of the same announces is, in fact, a desire for

⁶⁷ Jabre, “*Plus d’une loi*,” 38.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 16.

difference. She explains: “This is why Freud will connect repetition with the death drive: the compulsion to repeat expresses . . . the desire to return to a time before the beginning—to go back not for the sake of regressing but in order to take it over again, to do it otherwise. The desire for repetition is essentially the desire for difference.”⁷⁰ And yet, this desire for difference manifests in more of the same. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that, as Jabre notes, in spite of “the apparent conservatism of repetition compulsion,” philosophers like Derrida, as well as Deleuze and Guattari, have made various attempts to reinterpret and reformulate repetition-compulsion so that it not entail this limitation as an apparently conservative, depoliticized force.⁷¹ Consideration of these attempts, however, falls outside the scope of the present discussion. It suffices, for my present purposes, to indicate that there are plausible reasons to think that compulsion names a conservative force.⁷²

Compulsion, understood in the sense for which I have argued here, involves a *resistance* to change. In opposition to those accounts surveyed in Chapter One (those which assign habit a negative valuation, owing to their mistaking habit for a resistance to change, and nothing more), I turn in the following chapter to a pair of much more dynamic accounts of habit: namely, those of Hume and Ravaisson, respectively. One invariably finds that these two accounts regard habit in a much more laudatory fashion: Hume, for instance, calls habit “the great guide of human life,” for reasons which will soon become clear.⁷³ But it is Ravaisson’s account, in particular, which manages to foreground habit’s plasticity. That is, Ravaisson’s account, irreducible to the conservative force characteristic of

⁷⁰ Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 148.

⁷¹ Jabre, “*Plus d’une loi*,” 16–17.

⁷² Should it turn out that, with enough maneuvering, compulsion (as in repetition-compulsion, in the sense elaborated by Freud) can be successfully shown *not* to consist in a necessarily conservative force, I am willing to accept the consequence that my present attempt to think habit as distinct from compulsion may face additional challenges.

⁷³ Hume, *Enquiry*, 29.

compulsion, foregrounds not only habit's *resistance* to change, but its *receptivity* to change as well. It is to these two accounts of habit that I now turn.

Chapter 3. The Philosophy of Habit

The Force of Habit

As discussed at length in the introductory chapter, habit has represented a source of significant division among philosophers working since at least the early modern period. At face value, there appears in the history of Western philosophy few appraisals of habit's value more laudatory than that of Hume. Hume identifies habit, or custom, as "the great guide of human life."¹ Hume's remarks on habit appear within the context of his skeptical solution to the problem of induction. He postulates that it is habit, rather than reason, which accounts for our inductive expectations: our expectations, that is, that our predictions about future events will accord with or resemble our past observations.² After surveying both the problem of induction and his skeptical solution, I consider the extent to which Hume's remarks on habit shed light on the lingering question of his own inductive skepticism.³ That is, it remains a matter of debate whether or not Hume understood himself to be giving an argument for inductive skepticism. One view is that Hume did not really take his skeptical solution to the problem of induction to be an adequate one. That is, if reason cannot account for our inductive inferences—and if they are instead merely habitual or customary, then this is grounds for concluding that we are not epistemically justified in making them. According to this view, the problem of

¹ Hume, *Enquiry*, 29.

² *Ibid.*, 28.

³ The present discussion is limited to Hume's treatment of habit, or custom, in his mature work, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748). This means that I forgo consideration of his earlier text, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740). This is a choice which seems justifiable in light of Hume's own remarks about this earlier text. In the advertisement appearing at the beginning of the posthumous 1777 edition of the *Enquiry*, Hume refers to the *Treatise* as "that juvenile work, which the Author never acknowledged," in reference to his decision to publish it anonymously (*Ibid.*, xviii). Hume makes his wishes clear, when, in reference to the *Enquiry* (along with the *Dissertation on the Passions* and the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*), he writes: "Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles" (*Ibid.*).

induction is one which Hume himself takes to be unsolvable, thus casting him as an inductive skeptic. Against this interpretation, I argue that Hume's account of habit supplies us with sufficient evidence for the claim that he understood his skeptical solution to the problem of induction as posing an adequate solution to the problem of induction.

Habit's ability to underwrite our inductive expectations is why Hume calls it "the great guide of human life."⁴ But in spite of this seemingly high praise, Hume's account, in truth, leaves much to be desired. This hypothesized faculty, despite making "our world orderly and predictable," is only that: a hypothesis.⁵ Accordingly, it is a principle about which Hume thinks we can say very little. In the following section, I turn to Ravaisson's account, which expands on several of Hume's insights. Rather than viewing Hume's remarks on habit as a mere 'false start' on the way to Ravaisson's account, it is worthwhile to linger with Hume for several reasons. First, doing so can help to disabuse us of habit's negative appraisal by figures such as those surveyed in chapter one. Hume's celebration of habit thus helps clear the way for Ravaisson's celebration of habit in what are much more explicitly ontological terms. But since my overriding concern in this thesis lies in contributing to an understanding of habit which resists reducibility to mere compulsion, Hume can be of additional help. Recall that under the conception of compulsion developed in chapter two, compulsion appears as a conservative force, capable only of reproducing the same. The repetitive dimension which we now associate with compulsion, which only became fully realized with Freud, consists in a ceaseless repetition of the same. As Carlisle argues, figures like Spinoza and Kant, figures who see habit as a threat to philosophy, tend

⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁵ Carlisle, *On Habit*, 3.

to criticize habit as though it signals little more than a resistance to change. Hume, however, invites us to see habit differently, as more than a conservative force. As Carlisle explains:

Repetition is another source of philosophical difficulty, since it implies both identity and difference and thus raises the perennial question of how these elemental concepts are connected. Hume points out that habits develop when repetition ‘makes a difference’, and this seems puzzling because in ordinary discourse repetition implies a recurrence of the same.

One of the strengths of Hume’s analysis, which Ravaisson expands upon, is his recognition that habit involves more than just constancy: it is also inextricably linked with change. This insight will be further developed in our discussion below of the ‘double law of habit.’ Already present in Hume, however, are the ingredients for an account of habit which recognizes not only its *resistance* to change, but also its characteristic *receptivity* to change. That is, without this latter condition, habit would appear no different from compulsion. Let us now turn to Hume’s discussion of habit, which appears in his skeptical solution to the problem of induction.

Hume on Habit

An inquiry into the faculties of the human psyche, when properly conducted, makes it possible, Hume thinks, for us to shed light on and give order to the mysteries of human nature. He reasons:

The only method of freeing learning, at once, from these abstruse questions, is to enquire seriously into the nature of human understanding, and show, from an exact analysis of its powers and capacity, that it is by no means fitted for such remote and abstruse subjects. We must submit to this fatigue, in order to live at ease ever after.⁶

⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, 6.

He accepts that the “mind is endowed with several powers and faculties,” with the most obvious distinctions holding “between the will and understanding, the imagination and passions.”⁷ That these kinds of concerns animate Hume’s work in the *Enquiry* is important to bear in mind, since it is in terms of—and in relation to—the above categories that he articulates his conception of habit.

Hume divides the perceptions of the mind into two categories: thoughts, or ideas, and impressions.⁸ These two are distinguished in terms of the relative “force and vivacity” of the perceptions contained therein.⁹ Impressions are the more lively of the two; they are given to us in the immediacy of sensory perception, and as such they faithfully retain the force and vivacity of sensory experience. Thoughts, or ideas, are much more faint; they consist in vague facsimiles of our sensory perceptions. For Hume, impressions are—to invert Descartes’ formulation—more ‘clear and distinct’ than thoughts or ideas.¹⁰ Hume further postulates that ideas are connected in three distinct ways: resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect.¹¹ He next divides the objects of human reason, which he takes to be propositional in form, into two categories: relations of ideas and matters of fact. ‘Relations of ideas’ denote those propositions which are “either intuitively or demonstratively certain.”¹² Examples abound in mathematics: “*That three times five is equal to the half of thirty*, expresses a

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ In the fourth of his *Meditations*, Descartes argues that the degree to which a thing, *x*, can be said to exist in reality, and the degree to which a proposition, *y*, can be said to be true, depend in either case on the extent to which my idea of *x* or *y* are ‘clear and distinct’: “Since herein lies the greatest and chief perfection of man, I think today’s meditation, in which I investigated the cause of error and falsity, was quite profitable. Nor can this cause be anything other than the one I have described; for as often as I restrain my will when I make judgments, so that it extends only to those matters that the intellect clearly and distinctly discloses to it, it plainly cannot happen that I err. For every clear and distinct perception is surely something, and hence it cannot come from nothing” (Descartes, *Meditations*, 41–42).

¹¹ Hume, *Enquiry*, 14.

¹² Ibid., 15.

relation between these numbers. Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought . . .”¹³ Yet, as David Sherry laments, “Hume, unfortunately, never explicates ‘the mere operation of thought.’”¹⁴ As a result, we are left with the task of clarifying what Hume means by this. The truth of this proposition, Hume seems to suggest, is easily discerned so long as one understands quantification and the basic operations of arithmetic. Other examples could just as easily be supplied by geometry or algebra. It suffices to say that Hume thinks such propositions are true necessarily, and that their truth is ascertainable *a priori*. Matters of fact, on the other hand, are true only contingently, and their truth is only ascertained *a posteriori*. The contrary of any proposition of this type implies no contradiction. An example Hume supplies is the proposition that the sun will rise tomorrow: “*That the sun will not rise to-morrow* is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than the affirmation, *that it will rise*. We should in vain, therefore, attempt to demonstrate its falsehood.”¹⁵ Owing to what evidence, Hume wonders, do we know for certain the truth of propositions of this second kind? Beyond our observational evidence, given to us in immediate sensory impressions or stored in our memory, how can we be certain of any matters of fact at all?

This is what has become known as the problem of induction. Induction, to put it simply, consists of generalizing on the basis of our past observations. The traditional problem with induction follows from, as Nelson Goodman puts it, “the recognition that anything may follow upon anything.”¹⁶ So far, every day that I have awoken, I have observed that the sun has risen. While I have never found myself in a position to seriously doubt that the sun will rise again tomorrow, I can—at

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ David Sherry, “Reason, Habit, and Applied Mathematics,” *Hume Studies* 35, no. 1–2 (2009): 65.

¹⁵ Hume, *Enquiry*, 15.

¹⁶ Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 81.

least in principle—imagine what it would be like for the sun to fail to rise. As I have said, such a proposition implies no contradiction. Now, I certainly predict that it will rise; my inductive expectations are that it will do tomorrow just what I have observed it to do on every prior occasion. But were I to attempt a demonstrative proof of this, how well would I do? As it turns out, no non-circular deductive proof can account for inductive inference.

One of the reasons for this is that, Hume explains: “All reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to be founded on the relation of *Cause and Effect*. By means of that relation alone we can go beyond the evidence of our memory and senses.”¹⁷ It is, therefore, by means of cause and effect that we would have evidence for matters of fact. But by what evidence can we account for cause and effect? Hume’s famous example involving billiard balls illustrates what is at issue:

When I see, for instance, a Billiard-ball moving in a straight line towards another; even suppose motion in the second ball should by accident be suggested to me, as the result of their contact or impulse; may I not conceive, that a hundred different events might as well follow from that cause? May not both these balls remain at absolute rest? May not the first ball return in a straight line, or leap off from the second in any line or direction? All these suppositions are consistent and conceivable. Why then should we give the preference to one, which is no more consistent or conceivable than the rest? All our reasonings *a priori* will never be able to show us any foundation for this preference.¹⁸

Suppose I notice a billiard ball rolling across the table. I observe as the one ball strikes another. Following this, I observe that the second ball, which had previously been at rest, has itself started to roll across the table. All that we have observed are these two events, one following the other. And yet we suppose that these two events admit of a necessary connection, that the first event did not just take place before the second in time, but that the action of the second was directly caused by that of the

¹⁷ Hume, *Enquiry*, 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

first. At issue is the fact that we do not—and indeed we could not—ever actually observe a necessary connection between these two events. Though they appear to us as constantly conjoined, no necessary connection between them can ever be directly observed.

Furthermore, should we attempt to wager a conclusive deductive argument to account for this connection, we would find that induction cannot be proven without assuming, in the form of a premise, induction itself. To account for matters of fact requires cause and effect. And since the exercise of reason is limited to logical deduction and observation (on the basis of sensory impressions), any argument purporting to justify causality would be circular. Why is this? Any attempt at a demonstrative proof of an inductive inference will require that, among one's premises, one stipulates a principle of causation (according to which effects result from prior causes). But the tools which Hume thinks reason permits us to use—namely logical deduction and observation—will never be sufficient to demonstratively prove the principle of causation upon which this argument depends. Reason, therefore, proves impotent to the task of accounting for our inductive expectations.

Having spelled out the problem posed by induction, Hume offers his skeptical solution: "All inferences from experience . . . are effects of custom, not of reasoning."¹⁹ Since reason is insufficient for accounting for our inductive expectations, Hume hypothesizes the existence of a faculty distinct from reason, which he terms 'habit' or 'custom,' whose role consists in supplying us with our inductive expectations. He specifically refers to this as a hypothesis: "This hypothesis seems even the only one, which explains the difficulty, why we draw, from a thousand instances, an inference, which we are not able to draw from one instance, that is, in no respect, different from them. Reason is incapable of any

¹⁹ Ibid., 28.

such variation.”²⁰ Habit, he theorizes, works according to the following description: “This principle has inputs which are sensations, and produces, in a semi-automatic, and not consciously regulated way, our inductive expectations of the future.”²¹ Reason is understood as an at least semi-conscious faculty, whereas habit would need to be non-conscious.

To return to our previous example, what accounts for one’s expectation that the sun will indeed rise tomorrow is, accordingly, the principle of habit. That is, “the principle which would determine that person to form such inferences is not reason, but a different principle called custom or habit, because the latter can explain the phenomena of inductive inference, whereas reason is utterly unable to offer us that explanation.”²² It is crucial to distinguish between the everyday sense of ‘habit’ and the more robust sense which is entailed by Hume’s hypothesized faculty: “Hume’s principle is *analogous* to ‘common-sense habit,’ but it certainly is not the same old propensity that everyone knew before him.”²³ That is, “Hume’s theories are really hypothetical, or really *theoretical*, that they are conjectures about unobservable causes, that they cannot be reduced to verifiable causal inferences, and that the empirical confirmation of the existence of the conjectured cause lies in the fact that its existence best explains some particular phenomenon.”²⁴ That is, in the absence of a better hypothesis (or, owing to the failure of the principle of reason to provide an adequate account of the origins of our idea of causal necessity), Hume thinks it appropriate to hypothesize a principle or faculty which can supply us with our inductive expectations.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Adrian Heathcote, “Force of Habit,” *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2007): 73.

²² João Paulo Monteiro, “Hume’s Conception of Science,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (1981): 331.

²³ Ibid., 339.

²⁴ Ibid., 340.

Since it is habit, rather than reason, which makes possible our inductive expectations, Hume calls habit “the great guide of human life.”²⁵ To be clear, Hume is still unwilling to grant that we can know that necessary connections exist—rather, he simply provides the etiology of that belief. Hume is concerned “rather with, what he sees as, the real source of the idea of *necessary connexions*: an impression of the operation of custom.”²⁶ Both the problem of induction and Hume’s skeptical solution, considered on their own, appear clear enough. Still in question is how exactly we should understand what Hume imagines himself to be doing in the skeptical solution. Concerning Hume’s philosophy, Norman Kemp Smith observes that: “The difficulty is not so much in regard to his arguments taken singly, which are in the main admirably lucid, but in regard to their bearing upon one another, and upon the central positions which they are intended to support.”²⁷ His account of habit, I contend, can go a long way toward disabusing us of this mistaken notion that Hume took himself to be arguing for inductive skepticism.

Nelson Goodman may seem like an unlikely source for us to consult on these matters. After all, in *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast* (1955), Goodman clearly diverges from Hume in a number of important respects. Concerning Hume’s contention that no necessary connections hold between matters of fact, Goodman goes a step further: “Although Hume’s dictum that there are no necessary connections of matters of fact has been challenged at times, it has withstood all attacks. Indeed, I should be inclined not merely to agree that there are no necessary connections of matters of fact, but to ask whether there

²⁵ Hume, *Enquiry*, 29.

²⁶ Heathcote, “Force of Habit,” 79.

²⁷ Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of Its Origins and Central Doctrines* (London: Macmillan, 1941), 79.

are any necessary connections at all.”²⁸ Goodman forgoes further elaboration of his views on the plausible absence of necessary connections, as they prove impertinent for the ensuing discussion. However, what is much more difficult to ignore is that Goodman’s insistence on what he terms his ‘new riddle of induction’ is predicated on the claim that Hume’s problem, or what he calls the ‘old problem of induction,’ is really an outmoded formulation of the problem. He states: “What is commonly thought of as the Problem of Induction has been solved, or dissolved.”²⁹ He goes on to suggest that the manner in which the problem of induction has been traditionally formulated is itself part of the problem. If the problem of induction is about supplying justification for our beliefs that future observations will necessarily accord with past ones, then, Goodman wonders:

Come to think of it, what precisely would constitute the justification we seek? If the problem is to explain how we know that certain predictions will turn out to be correct, the sufficient answer is that we don’t know any such thing. If the problem is to *find* some way of distinguishing antecedently between true and false predictions, we are asking for prevision rather than for philosophical explanation.³⁰

As Goodman will reiterate, “The criterion for the legitimacy of projections cannot be truth that is as yet undetermined. Failure to recognize this was responsible . . . for some of the worst misconceptions of the problem of induction.”³¹ With these issues in mind, Goodman proposes that we ought to shift focus from Hume’s dilemma to what he terms his ‘new riddle of induction.’ For Goodman:

The problem of prediction from past to future cases is but a narrower version of the problem of projecting from any set of cases to others. We saw that a whole cluster of troublesome problems concerning dispositions and possibility can be reduced to this problem of projection.

²⁸ Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, 59–60.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

That is why the new riddle of induction, which is more broadly the problem of distinguishing between projectible and non-projectible hypotheses, is as important as it is exasperating.³²

But long before Goodman's discussion ever gives way to talk of emeralds and the color grue, he first offers a defense of Hume against an interpretation that is popular, yet mistaken. He explains:

The heaviest criticism has taken the righteous position that Hume's account at best pertains only to the source of predictions, not their legitimacy; that he sets forth the circumstances under which we make given predictions—and in this sense explains why we make them—but leaves untouched the question of our license for making them. To trace origins, runs the old complaint, is not to establish validity: the real question is not why a prediction is in fact made but how it can be justified. Since this seems to point to the awkward conclusion that the greatest of modern philosophers completely missed the point of his own problem, the idea has developed that he did not really take his solution very seriously, but regarded the main problem as unsolved and perhaps insoluble. Thus we come to speak of 'Hume's problem' as though he propounded it as a question without answer.³³

Some scholars, Goodman explains, mistakenly take Hume to be giving an account of the origins of our predictions, while fumbling the question of their legitimacy. To avoid the uncomfortable conclusion that Hume's thinking here is deficient, scholars have tended to suppose that Hume did not really stand by his skeptical solution, and that he instead regards the problem as unsolvable.

Goodman opposes this interpretation, arguing that Hume's account intends to answer both of these questions, that of origins and that of legitimacy, and took his hypothesized principle of habit to be an adequate solution to both. He continues: "All this seems to me quite wrong. I think Hume grasped the central question and considered his answer to be passably effective. And I think his answer is reasonable and relevant, even if it is not entirely satisfactory."³⁴ Goodman concludes: "And we owe belated apologies to Hume. For in dealing with the question how normally accepted inductive

³² Ibid., 83.

³³ Ibid., 60–61.

³⁴ Ibid., 61.

judgments are made, he was in fact dealing with the question of inductive validity. The validity of a prediction consisted for him in its arising from habit, and thus in its exemplifying some past regularity.” This, I take it, is a question of central importance. That is, what if Hume did not really stand by his skeptical solution? What if, instead, he intended this to be an argument in favor of inductive skepticism? The argument might go something like this: if we can account for induction only on the basis of something like custom or habit, but not on the basis of reason, then should we not conclude that, after all, we really have no license for making inductive inferences in the first place?

I am in agreement with Goodman in thinking that an interpretation like the one sketched above would be misguided. The evidence seems rather to suggest that Hume really did believe that his hypothesized principle of habit, or custom, not only accounts for the origins of inductive inferences, but also attests to the legitimacy of our making them at all. As Adrian Heathcote points out, “Hume laboured long to give an account that worked within his naturalistic framework.”³⁵ I think it is befitting such a framework that Hume hypothesizes something like the idea that “human beings (and also animals) have an instinct which causes them to expect in the future the same regularities they have experienced in the past.”³⁶ For this reason, I agree with Heathcote’s claim that “Hume never considered himself to be giving an argument for inductive skepticism.”³⁷ That reason cannot account for our inductive expectations, in other words, does not imply that we dispense with our warrant for possessing and making use of them. Hume’s argument, rather, is that we are forced to look for their justification elsewhere, and this is the role for which he has the principle of habit, or custom, in mind.

³⁵ Heathcote, “Force of Habit,” 65.

³⁶ Monteiro, “Hume’s Conception of Science,” 342.

³⁷ Heathcote, “Force of Habit,” 65.

After all, it would make little sense for Hume to articulate his hypothesized principle of habit with the level of care and precision that he does if he did not take it to be an adequate justification for our inductive inferences.

While on the surface, Hume's praise of habit can sound like a veritable celebration, what Hume is in a sense *really* celebrating is habit's ability to rescue us from the threat of inductive skepticism. The image of habit presented above is that of an explanatory hypothesis—a power, faculty, or capacity whose existence we can infer, but never truly know. Ravaisson, to whom I now turn, offers a much more developed account of habit, and he is able to do this in part because for him, habit cannot be merely reduced to some or other mental faculty. Let us now turn to Ravaisson's vitalist account of habit.

Ravaisson on Habit

In spite of his scant publication record, Félix Ravaisson (1813-1900) has been called “perhaps France's most influential philosopher in the second half of the nineteenth century.”³⁸ His doctoral thesis, *De l'habitude* (1838), which remains the most influential of his publications, is a comprehensive and boldly vitalist account of habit. It draws from a number of figures, including Aristotle, Leibniz, and Maine de Biran. Though read closely by Bergson, his writings would fall into a state of relative neglect among French audiences. It was only as a result of Heidegger's endorsement that French phenomenologists would take a renewed interest in his work.³⁹ After experiencing a resurgence among

³⁸ Mark Sinclair, *Being Inclined: Félix Ravaisson's Philosophy of Habit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.

³⁹ In the editors' introduction to their 2008 English translation of Ravaisson's *Of Habit*, Carlisle and Sinclair relay how Heidegger “expressed profound admiration for Ravaisson's text when, in September 1945, he was visited in Freiburg by the young journalist Frédéric de Towarnicki. Heidegger's enthusiasm was subsequently related to Sartre, Lévinas and Jean Wahl, much to their surprise” [Carlisle and Sinclair, editors' introduction to Félix Ravaisson's *Of Habit*, 1–21 (London: Continuum 2008), 1].

the generation of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, Ravaisson's work in *Of Habit* would come to exert an impressive influence on ensuing generations of French thought. Among those particularly influenced by Ravaisson include François Laruelle, whose dissertation—and subsequent first book, still untranslated—concerns Ravaisson's ontology.⁴⁰ Though Laruelle's own project of 'non-philosophy' is typically conceived apart from his work on Ravaisson, Vincent Le has convincingly argued that the former's project owes its genesis in significant ways to his work on the latter.⁴¹ One of the most sustained critiques of Ravaisson can be found in Derrida's *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* (2005), which I will discuss shortly.

Ravaisson opens *Of Habit* by announcing two senses in which habit can be understood. In the first sense, habit consists in “a general and permanent way of being, the state of an existence considered either as the unity of its elements or as the succession of its different phases.”⁴² This is the general way in which we tend to refer to habit. But it is the second, much more interesting sense on which Ravaisson proposes to focus his discussion, namely in terms of “habit that is contracted, owing to a change, with respect to the very change that gave birth to it.”⁴³ Habit—whose acquisition takes place as the result of a change—is characterized by its persistence: that is, its continuation beyond the change which brought it about. Habit is thus more than a mere or temporary state, just as it exceeds the change to which it in part owes its existence. Change, Ravaisson tells us, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for habit. If one were to toss a coin into the air one hundred times, it would be mistaken to

⁴⁰ See François Laruelle, *Phénomène et différence: Essai sur l'ontologie de Ravaisson* (1971).

⁴¹ Vincent Le, “The Origins of Laruelle's Non-Philosophy in Ravaisson's Understanding of Metaphysics,” *Labyrinth: An International Journal for Philosophy, Value Theory and Sociocultural Hermeneutics* 20, no. 1 (2018): 5.

⁴² Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, 25.

⁴³ Ibid.

think that the coin would have thereby acquired a habit. The coin does not change with respect to its being thrown, no matter how many times the toss is repeated. Habit entails a kind of disposition, a relationship of dynamism, toward the change which gives birth to it. Ravaisson, invoking Aristotle, therefore characterizes habit as a *hexis*: “a disposition, a virtue.”⁴⁴ It is a disposition (which is itself susceptible to change), towards the change which brought it about. Leaving aside the kind of change by means of which something is brought into or out of existence, “all change is realized in time.”⁴⁵ Therefore, in Ravaisson’s discussion of change, he means not only modification, but modification as taking place in time. A habit, then, consists of “a disposition relative to change, which is engendered in a being by the continuity or the repetition of this very same change.”⁴⁶ It is a disposition towards change which responds in some way to the repetition or continuity of the very same change. In other words, “habit is what remains of a repeated change, the residue of repetition.”⁴⁷ Habit, in Ravaisson’s lexicon, is thus a thoroughly vitalist concept, and I return to it in a moment. First, however, I will outline some of the other terms in his ontology, as these elements help shed light on habit and its role within his vitalist monism.

Ravaisson reasons that the fundamental characteristic of any being must lie precisely in its tendency to persist in its manner of being. According to Ravaisson:

The conditions under which being is represented to us in the world are Space and Time. Space is the condition and the most apparent and elementary form of stability, of permanence; time is the universal condition of change. The simplest change, and the most general, is also that which is relative to space itself, namely movement.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Malabou, “Addition and Grace,” vii.

⁴⁸ Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, 27.

Therefore, if being is represented to us in terms of space and time, then the most basic form of being must be that which is an ‘extended mobile,’ or a body. That is, in being a body, a body must persist in space (extension) and change with respect to time (mobility). Space and time—and, correspondingly, extension and mobility—thus constitute the necessary conditions for the ordering or structuring of any body in existence.

Ravaisson’s thought owes much to a number of his philosophical predecessors, but perhaps none more so than Maine de Biran. Ravaisson inherits from Maine de Biran the latter’s formulation of the ‘double law of habit.’ According to this ‘double law,’ “the continuity or the repetition of passion weakens it; the continuity or repetition of action exalts and strengthens it.”⁴⁹ Passion and action are here conceived as representing opposing extremes which lie along a continuum. These terms are inherited from Maine de Biran, whose view of psychology “is based on a distinction between passive and active impressions. Passive impressions are pure sensations, whereas active impressions are perceptions that involve the voluntary movement of the body and its sense organs.”⁵⁰ Passion is associated with receptivity, and consists in being affected and *undergoing* change. Action is associated with spontaneity, which consists in *affecting* change. Ravaisson’s vitalism understands these two kinds of impressions (that is, active and passive) as stemming from the same source. The ‘principle of life,’ by means of the activity of the will, is accountable for both passion and action. This is characteristic of his vitalist rejection of “mechanistic or ‘material’ explanations,” preferring instead to understand being in terms of a vitalist monism.⁵¹ Within this vitalist monism, then, passion and action, since they spring

⁴⁹ Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, 49.

⁵⁰ Carlisle and Sinclair, editors’ introduction, 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

from the same source (namely life) lie on opposite extremes of a continuum that encompasses the full range of motive possibilities, including those ranging from pure receptivity to pure spontaneity.

The mediation of these extremes is called “effort, which is felt when the will, in initiating movement, encounters the resistance of the motor organs, which in turn encounter resistance from external objects.”⁵² The image of habit which emerges on this picture is not one which is reducible to a form of mechanistic repetition. The latter kind of view, as surveyed in chapter one (associated with Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant), understands habit in terms of “pure mechanism, routine process, devitalization of sense.”⁵³ So conceived, habit risks annulling freedom. Ravaisson shows how habit can never be just this. Instead, habit, which Ravaisson conceives as a singular force, is always invested, as Malabou writes, in both “grace (ease, facility, power) and . . . addiction (machinic repetition).”⁵⁴ For Ravaisson, it is never just one or the other. It is always freedom *and* necessity, activity *and* passivity, spontaneity *and* receptivity. Compulsion would thus lie along one extreme of the continuum that comprises the broader category of habit, but the latter would thus remain irreducible to the former.

We have Derrida to thank for one of the most sustained critical engagements with the ideas presented in *Of Habit*. This confrontation takes place in *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* (2005), in which Ravaisson features as one among Derrida’s many targets. In this text, Derrida submits the theme of touch to a forensic analysis spanning the history of philosophy. With respect to Ravaisson in particular, Derrida argues that the themes presented in *Of Habit*—which include not only habit, but also life, change, and repetition—as well as Ravaisson’s entire vitalist ontology, hinge on a problematic

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Malabou, “Addiction and Grace,” vii.

⁵⁴ Ibid., viii.

notion of touch. Ravaissan, drawing much inspiration from Leibniz and Maine de Biran, but also Aristotle, theorizes in terms of vast continuums in which extremes manage to meet, interact, and negotiate by dint of a third term. Effort, says Ravaissan, is one such third term, which lies along the continuum stretching from passivity to activity, and by means of which these two extremes meet. Derrida, noticing that effort here cannot be dissociated from touch, emphasizes the problematic regard in which touch is being deployed. Ravaissan's project, he argues, hinges on a sense of touch as auto-affectivity. Derrida, emphasizing the irreducibility of difference and alterity, draws out the concept of auto-affectivity, in turn demonstrating its dependence on a prior form of hetero-affectivity. Before returning to Derrida's critique of Ravaissan in detail, it is first necessary that I clarify Derrida's conceptions of 'deconstruction' and '*différance*,' since it is with respect to the insights proffered by these dual terms that Derrida's project in *On Touching* is made possible.

Derrida's philosophy is characterized by its preoccupation with figures in phenomenology, especially Husserl, Heidegger, and Levinas. Deconstruction is the clearest example of what these engagements have helped to generate. Derrida frequently describes 'deconstruction' as having "imposed itself" on him while in search of a French language correlate for Heidegger's notion of *Destruktion*.⁵⁵ In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger makes a plea for the rekindling of the question of the meaning of being, this most "fundamental question of philosophy."⁵⁶ *Being and Time* opens with Heidegger's convincing plea for the importance of rekindling this question. But how does one go about this task? Ontology—or at least the forms thereof which have been passed down to us in the

⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend," in *Derrida and Différance*, ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, 1–5 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1.

⁵⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 50.

philosophical tradition—is by no means up to the task of approaching the question of the meaning of being. In Paragraph Six, we encounter Heidegger’s discussion of the importance of the task of destroying the history of ontology. As Derrida explains, ruminating on this sense of *Destruktion* is what prompted the word ‘deconstruction’ to impose itself on him.

Derridean deconstruction, like any number of other intellectual trends, has been frequently misunderstood, at times being blamed for some of the crises of meaning that it has merely exposed. It has been associated with nihilism and relativism, and those who engage with it have faced accusations running the gamut from alleged amoralism to intentional obscurantism. Derrida responds to these sorts of claims, saying:

Those who fear and wish to deny the inescapable necessity of these transformations try to see in deconstruction the agent responsible for such changes, when in my eyes it is above all else a question of trying to understand them, of interpreting them, so as to respond to them in the most responsible fashion possible.⁵⁷

In avoiding falling victim to such an error, an instructive first step lies in first saying what deconstruction is not. In his “Letter to a Japanese Friend” (1983), Derrida explains that “deconstruction is not an anti-philosophy or a critique of philosophy.”⁵⁸ He further insists that deconstruction is not a critique, an analysis, or a method:

Deconstruction is not a critical operation; it takes critique as its object; deconstruction, at one moment or another, always aims at the trust confided in the critical, critico-theoretical agency, that is, the deciding agency, the ultimate possibility of the decidable; deconstruction is a deconstruction of critical dogmatics.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Points....: Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 413.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

Deconstruction is therefore not simply a form of critique, nor does it subject the notion of critique to its own critique. Instead, critique is itself an object of possible deconstruction. Critique fails to go as far as deconstruction, since the former leaves intact a certain faith, a fidelity, with respect to its own principles. Similarly, deconstruction is not a mode of analysis, “because the dismantling of a structure is not a regression toward a *simple element*, toward an *indissoluble origin*.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, “A deconstruction cannot be ‘theoretical,’ beginning with its very principle. It is not limited to concepts, to thought content, or to discourses.”⁶¹ Derrida insists that “deconstructive questions cannot give rise to methods, that is, technical procedures that could be repeated from one context to another.”⁶² It also cannot be reduced to a methodology, since “deconstruction is not even an *act* or an *operation*.”⁶³ Whereas any act or operation must imply an active subject, deconstruction undermines the coherence of active subjectivity or agency altogether. I will return to this point in a moment.

Derrida further defends this motif against the mistaken idea that it is a tool of pure negativity, concerned only with destruction. Deconstruction, he insists, “is not negative, even though it has often been interpreted as such despite all sorts of warnings. For me, it always accompanies an affirmative exigency.”⁶⁴ Indeed, his aim is one of “trying, on the contrary, to define deconstruction as a thinking of affirmation.”⁶⁵ Derrida prefers to cloak even its negating aspects in more nuanced language, using descriptions such as: “the undoing, decomposing, and desedimenting of structures.”⁶⁶ To put it all too

⁶⁰ Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” 3.

⁶¹ Derrida, *Points*, 28.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 200.

⁶³ Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” 3.

⁶⁴ Derrida, *Points*, 83.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁶⁶ Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” 3.

simply, deconstruction emphasizes that that which is constructed can be deconstructed. As he explains, “deconstruction, without being anti-systematic, is on the contrary, and nevertheless, not only a search for, but itself a consequence of, the fact that the system is impossible.”⁶⁷ It works not by opposing coherent and complete systems, but instead by finding that weak element or gap which always already prevents the system from ever being fully closed. Deconstruction, then, is the recognition “that the system does not work, and that this dysfunction not only interrupts the system but itself accounts for the desire for system.”⁶⁸ The intellectual scene out of which Derrida’s writings first emerged was one dominated by structuralism, which I will touch on below. Suffice it to say that the weight of this philosophical insight—that the yearning for systematicity results precisely from its own impossibility—cannot be overstated.

Though structural and architectural metaphors are common, Derrida also describes deconstruction with reference to the act of translation. In his “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” Derrida characterizes deconstruction as “*the* question of translation.”⁶⁹ Translation, we generally suppose, involves taking a word or phrase which exists in one language, and then finding its correlate in another tongue. Conceiving of translation as such presupposes that the identities being translated exist prior to the act or operation of translation. Deconstruction, in contrast, holds that it is in fact translation—the difference or gap separating the terms on either side—that exists prior to the determination of any identity or identities.

⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 4.

⁶⁸ Derrida and Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, 4.

⁶⁹ Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” 1.

Allow me to make one final point connecting deconstruction with the question of the subject. I emphasized earlier that deconstruction is irreducible to terms such as critique, analysis, method, or act. An important reason for this is that all of these presume a subject responsible for carrying out their operations. But any such subject is itself undermined by deconstruction. Since deconstruction necessarily deconstructs identities, and since the subject is one such identity, it follows that deconstruction entails the deconstruction of the subject. Concerning this question of the subject, Derrida suggests that it may be “necessary to give up trying to do the impossible, that is to say, trying to reconstitute or reconstruct that which has already been deconstructed (and which, moreover, has deconstructed ‘itself,’ offered itself since forever to the deconstruction ‘of itself.’”⁷⁰ This point will be at the forefront of his treatment of auto-affectivity in *On Touching*.

Having described deconstruction in detail, I will briefly describe ‘*différance*.’ Deconstruction, as I have said, deconstructs identities, revealing that they lack the stability we typically accord them. In addition to phenomenology, Derrida was also heavily influenced by structuralism. According to structural linguistics, the fact that a particular signifier refers to a particular signified is not a result of some transcendent, originary, or natural linkage which necessarily unites the two. Instead, the link is merely one which owes to convention—the result of an arbitrary association that developed contingently. Thus, particular words or concepts only come to have meaning within a specific context, within a chain of possible substitutions. For Derrida, this suggests that meaning is deferred, differs, and bears the trace of that which is absent.

⁷⁰ Derrida, *Points*, 259.

Différance serves for Derrida to mark this gapping in a manner which is at once temporal ('defer') and spatial ('differ'). The 'a' in *différance* derives from the present participle of the verb in French, suggesting a verbal and active dimension. But why this active dimension? If deconstruction deconstructs identities, then so too does it undermine the primacy of the subject, since the subject is one such identity. *Différance* is "neither a word nor a concept," as both of these would themselves represent objects of deconstruction.⁷¹ Instead, deconstruction takes place without a subject directing it. What is active, then, is *différance* itself. Identities are the products which result from this activity. Since deconstruction problematizes identities, what results from deconstruction is an opening up to "an unsubstantial gap or spacing, to the *a* of *différance*."⁷² To reiterate, Derrida's notion of deconstruction results in an opening up and affirming of difference and deferring, both of whose meanings are manifested in this notion of *différance*.

In his thinking of *différance*, Derrida is particularly influenced by Levinas. The latter's philosophy emphasizes unsurpassable, infinite alterity. This is most clear in his positioning of ethics, rather than ontology, as first philosophy. In *Otherwise than Being* (1974),⁷³ Levinas refers to a passage from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–1880)—one to which he repeatedly returns in subsequent texts and interviews, though frequently modified depending on the particular ethical point under review.⁷⁴ The quote in question: "we are all guilty toward others and I am the guiltiest of all."⁷⁵

⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, 1–27 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 7.

⁷² François Raffoul, "Tout Contre Heidegger," *Oxford Literary Review* 43, no. 1 (2021): 90.

⁷³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 146.

⁷⁴ Alain Toumayan, "I More than the Others': Dostoevsky and Levinas," *Yale French Studies*, no. 104 (2004): 55.

⁷⁵ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Bantam, 1970), 347.

Levinas' thought privileges the relationship one bears to the other, which amounts to an infinite and unfulfillable "responsibility for the Other."⁷⁶ He describes ethics as "a comportment in which the other, who is strange and indifferent to you, who belongs neither to the order of your interest nor to your affections, at the same time matters to you. His alterity concerns you."⁷⁷ At the root of Levinas' thought is an ethical relationship in which the subject is called to respond to the demands of an other. Rather than pre-existing this call, the ethical subject is in fact constituted as such precisely as a result of the demands placed upon her. The subject is responsible for the other, and it is this responsibility, which is infinite and unconditional, which both constitutes the ethical and forms the basis of all philosophy. This ethical relationship is one which emanates from the experience of the face—the face of the other—through which the other announces itself and towards which one is called. Levinas characterizes this experience as one of a profound weakness. Signified by the face is the intense vulnerability of the other to the potential for injury, trauma, or even death. The ethical thus entails the overcoming of the "incitement to murder, the temptation to go to the extreme, to neglect the other," and to instead affirm the responsibility one has to care for the other above and beyond any concern for the self.⁷⁸ Levinas argues that, "in responsibility for the Other, one is, in the final analysis, responsible for the death of the Other."⁷⁹ Furthermore, "Evil is the refusal of that responsibility, the fact of letting this prior attention turn itself away from the face of the other man."⁸⁰ Derrida's own

⁷⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 95.

⁷⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 48.

⁷⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 104.

⁷⁹ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 118-119.

⁸⁰ Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be?*, 55.

philosophy—evinced by his conceptions of both deconstruction and *différance*—inherits this Levinasian emphasis on infinite alterity.

Having introduced Derrida's notions of deconstruction and *différance*, I now turn to his critique of Ravaisson. Derrida's project in *On Touching* is, in the broadest sense, twofold: on the one hand it deconstructs the founding experience of touch present throughout the history of thought, while on the other hand lauding Jean-Luc Nancy as the sole philosopher who has yet managed to theorize touch in a manner which avoids recourse to a problematic metaphysics of presence. Leaving aside this second, affirmative aim, the present discussion is limited to clarifying Derrida's first aim (with respect to his treatment of Ravaisson, in particular). Ravaisson is first named in the following passage:

For one of the theses or hypotheses of this book (for laughs, of course) is that something took place—an *affaire*, a plot, a sort of conspiracy, a philosophical intrigue of touch, in Europe, along certain boundaries (more figures of touch) and at the borders of France, between France and England, to which I just alluded, and between France and Germany—with Kant and Husserl on one side, and Maine de Biran, Ravaisson, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze on the other.⁸¹

Derrida suggests that representatives on both sides of the above border commit the same misstep, which is to base their thought on a dubious conception of touch. Much of what Derrida criticizes with respect to Ravaisson stems from the former bringing to bear the faults of Maine de Biran onto the latter—and according to Malabou, doing so unfairly.⁸² The most significant distinction Derrida draws between Maine de Biran and Ravaisson concerns the differential degrees to which they attend to questions of the hand. Derrida notices that, in a manner quite distinct from Maine de Biran, there is no mention of the hand in Ravaisson's thesis:

⁸¹ Derrida, *On Touching*, 137.

⁸² See Malabou, "Addiction and Grace."

If Ravaisson apparently avoids anthropocentrism or anthropologism, if he does not lock himself into a description that would pay much attention to the human hand, it is also because his purpose is to establish a spiritualistic metaphysics of life, a general ontology of the living, which is revealed from one end of his book to the other, and orients his interpretation of touch.⁸³

Why, Derrida asks, does Ravaisson omit all mention of the hand, if it is the hand that touches? Derrida concludes that the hand is only absent because Ravaisson is concerned with giving a metaphysics of life, one that would be true to all of its attendant forms. This includes those forms of organic life which lack hands, stretching from the most basic of organisms to plants as well as most animals. Any avoidance of anthropocentrism thus stems from the breadth and ambition of Ravaisson's ontology of life.

Chief among Derrida's accomplishments in the text is that he undermines those efforts in metaphysics which hinge on a conception of touch as self-touching or self-feeling. Derrida argues that across traditions, including figures ranging from Descartes to Deleuze, thinkers have grounded their thought in a form of auto-affection, which we can define as: "an original touch by which the subject experiences its presence to itself."⁸⁴ Ravaisson, as Derrida will claim, is no different. Ravaisson's vitalism is founded on a prior vital force which is conscious of its relation to both activity and passivity.

As Derrida paraphrases Ravaisson:

If movement presupposes a power exceeding resistance, the relation between power and resistance can be measured by the consciousness of the effort that thus envelops activity and passivity. Effort situates the locus of equilibrium between 'action and passion,' as between 'perception and sensation.'⁸⁵

⁸³ Derrida, *On Touching*, 157.

⁸⁴ Malabou, "Addiction and Grace," xiv.

⁸⁵ Derrida, *On Touching*, 155.

Thus, the continuum along which habit operates, stretching from passivity to activity, and whose endpoint extremities meet by means of ‘effort,’ commits the same error characteristic of all other systems which are underpinned by a metaphysics of touch. Indeed, the theme of Derrida’s text lies in showing the extent to which, throughout the history of thought, “the sense of touch is what links all metaphysical oppositions, driving all totalizing efforts in philosophy.”⁸⁶ Ravaisson, in order to make metaphysical oppositions (activity and passivity, spontaneity and receptivity) meet, proposes a third term (effort, habit) by means of which the two ends come into contact. In every case, the third term is then said to co-found both extremes of the opposition, an ability it generates owing to its status as a manifestation of a prior vitality or life. Each of these metaphysical oppositions is then connected by means of a prior, all-encompassing vitality. The distance or the abiding gap between conceptual opposites is closed.

It is there, in what looks like a magic trick or an effect of miraculous grace, by dint of a “confusion” or the simple explanation that it ‘implies,’ that the divisible becomes indivisible and the interval fills up. And it is also there, more or less in secret, in a more or less clandestine fashion, that a figure of touch (‘extremes *touch*’ [*les extrêmes se touchent*]) grounds this metaphysics of the life of the spirit as a metaphysics of touch.”⁸⁷

As if by a ‘magic trick,’ metaphysical opposites touch, having been in a sense born out of the same originary monism. This form of touching purports to be a form of auto-affection.

But for Derrida, there is no possibility of a pure auto-affection. Instead, “touch is always subject to *différance* and can thus never sustain only itself. All touch is not auto-affection: it is hetero-affection, and therefore it is irreducibly mediated.”⁸⁸ The gap or spacing which separates terms

⁸⁶ Patrick O’Connor, “Letting Habits Die: Derrida, Ravaisson and the Structure of Life,” *Symposium* 19, no. 1 (2015): 234.

⁸⁷ Derrida, *On Touching*, 156.

⁸⁸ O’Connor, “Letting Habits Die,” 235.

like activity and passivity is one which is prior to these terms. For Derrida, then, “there can be no pure life, or life that is only life itself. Life cannot be a hierarchical bestowal of life without already being infected by alterity.”⁸⁹ Rather than thinking that metaphysical opposites touch by dint of a vitalist monism, or to accept any metaphysics of touch, life, or presence, Derrida endeavors to show the ways in which deconstruction and *différance* represent necessary conditions better suited to the task of grounding thought.

By way of conclusion, I now turn to endorse a claim levied by both Carlisle and Malabou: namely, that in spite of Derrida’s criticisms, Ravaillon’s account of habit, articulated nearly a century before Derrida’s birth, already evinced the latter’s notion of the *pharmakon*. The *pharmakon*, as developed in Derrida’s essay, “Plato’s Pharmacy” (1972), is a drug which is at once poison and remedy.⁹⁰ This concept invites us to consider how identities are infected from within by difference. The relationship an identity bears to itself is not one of self-sameness, homogeneity, but rather of otherness, or alterity: it is heterogeneous to itself. Ignoring altogether the above critique levied by Derrida, Carlisle repeatedly describes habit as an instance of the *pharmakon*. Habit’s duplicity invites this observation, she argues:

If the philosophical tradition tends to divide itself on the question of habit, this is because of a duplicity within the matter itself. Habit *is* at once a blessing and a curse. In this respect it is akin to the Greek concept of the *pharmakon*, which is a drug that may be both a poison and a cure. Jacques Derrida has used this idea to explore the ambivalence of writing, but it is even more apt in the case of habit, whose comforting and anaesthetizing properties can bring it close to compulsion and addiction.⁹¹

⁸⁹ O’Connor, “Letting Habits Die,” 239.

⁹⁰ See Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy” (1972).

⁹¹ Carlisle, *On Habit*, 5.

Malabou argues along similar lines. Habit represents an instance of the *pharmakon*, since “the best things can, under the influence of habit, be transformed into poisons.”⁹² That is, habit at once “infects and cures, it is a poison that heals sickness.”⁹³ Tying habit’s *pharmakon*-like character explicitly to Ravaillon’s account, she prompts the question: “For Ravaillon also, it is one and the same force that engenders good and bad habits. Must we see in this affirmation of unity the rejection of strangeness or, on the contrary, the recognition of the presence of the alien within the same?”⁹⁴ Malabou insists on the latter: “It is precisely of habit as *pharmakon* – at once poison and remedy – that Ravaillon speaks all along.”⁹⁵ She uses this insight to offer some final conclusions: “Because we are habituated to habit, we end up seeing in it only something bad, and no longer recognize the remedy. It is doubtless this that happened to Descartes and to Kant. Perhaps this has also happened to ourselves. Perhaps it has happened to deconstruction. But the rejection of habit – just like the deconstruction of presence – can become a tic, like anything else.”⁹⁶ Owing to its *pharmakon*-like character, habit remains irreducible—as I have labored to show—to the one-sided, conservative law of compulsion. Whereas compulsion appears limited to a force of repetition resistant to difference, ‘habit,’ as Ravaillon shows us, names both a resistance *and* an openness to change.

⁹² Malabou, “Addiction and Grace,” xx.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., xix.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., xx.

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