
THE FORCE OF HABIT

BY

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Abstract: Habits figure in action-explanations because of their distinctive force. But what is the force of habit, and how does it motivate us? In this paper, I argue that the force of habit is the feeling of familiarity one has with the familiar course of action, where this feeling reveals a distinctive reason for acting in the usual way. I do this by considering and rejecting a popular account of habit's force in terms of habit's apparent automaticity, by arguing that one can do something out of habit and from deliberation, before going on to defend The Familiarity View.

The idea that habit has a distinctive force is central to our thinking about its nature. The idea appears in popular articles, literary culture, and is liberally scattered throughout the philosophical literature.¹ Nathan Brett recounts a story about a night-watchman who 'from sheer force of habit', used to switch off the light, leaving Brett in the dark (Brett, 1981, p. 362), and Bill Pollard points out that we may 'explain somebody's putting the kettle on in the morning as done through 'force of habit'' (Pollard, 2006b, p. 57). Despite this, there has been almost no attempt to say what the force of habit *is*, or even what such talk amounts to. My aim in this paper is to rectify this, and in doing so to make a substantive proposal about the explanatory nature of habit.

In Section 1, I will motivate focusing on the force of habit by arguing that a theory of habit's force is really a theory of its explanatory nature, and as such is indispensable in accounting for habit. In Section 2, I consider an account of the force of habit which is nascent in the literature. This view links habit's force closely with a certain kind of automaticity which is often thought to be essential to habitual action. However, in Section 3, I argue that the connection with automaticity is much more tenuous than is often

¹For popular articles, see Bouchier (2019) and Sankari (2017). For literary examples, see de Castro (2019), Carrington (2005), and Perry (2011). For the philosophical literature, see Brett (1981), Carlisle (2006, 2014), Douskos (2017b, 2019b, 2019a), Owens (2017), Pollard (2003, 2006a), Ryle (1949/1970), Romdenh-Romluc (2016), and Sinclair (2011, 2019).

thought, so the account fails. In Section 4, I motivate and defend an alternative view: that the force of habit is the habit-bearer's feeling of familiarity with their usual course of action. I argue that this view is independently plausible, and gives us an elegant and powerful conception of habit's role in our lives.

1. *Habit, force, and explanation*

Why should we try to give an account of the force of habit? What is it about the notion of habit's force which deserves special treatment? I think there is one very substantial reason, which derives from the fact that habits figure in explanations of why people do what they do when they act habitually. The fact that Alice has a habit of singing in the shower is part of the explanation of why she sings when she is showering; Bert's habit of sitting in his favourite armchair in the evening is relevant to explaining why he sits there.

However, we can ask *why* habits are so placed to figure in these explanations. What is it about Alice's and Bert's respective habits which makes it the case that their habits are involved in the relevant explanations? For a theory of habit to even get going, if it is to account for habit's distinctive explanatory role, it needs to answer this question. Otherwise, it will be limited to saying *which* explanations habits figure in, without being able to say anything about *why* they do so. Compare this position with a theory of pain which affirmed that Jane's pain was relevant to explaining why she took some painkillers, but was silent on the question of *why* Jane's pain was relevant to her doing so. That would be clearly unsatisfactory.²

The example of pain is instructive, because it is natural to think that the imagined theory fails to provide an account of the *force* of pain – its capacity to motivate Jane to engage in a fairly particular set of pain-related behaviours. Similarly, a theory of hunger must provide an account of the motivational explanatory *force* of being hungry (Ombrato & Phillips, 2020). The same goes for a theory of desire (Baker, 2017; Schafer, 2013). In each case, we want to know how we can be in the grip of these states; how they can determine what we do. Moreover, these theories should account for the potency of pain, hunger, and desire in ways that account for the difference in their respective forces; the difference in which behaviours they motivate, how they do so, and why.

The case of habit exactly parallels this. In order to account for habit's capacity to figure in action-explanations, we need an account of the

²In fact, much of the contemporary discussion of pain is aimed to make good on this requirement (Bain, 2019; Barlassina & Hayward, 2019; Cutter & Tye, 2014; Jacobson, 2013; Klein, 2015).

motivational explanatory *force of habit*. This account must therefore do the same thing as the accounts of pain, hunger, and desire. It must, for instance, tell us why Alice's habit issues in her *singing* (rather than beatboxing) *in the shower* (rather than in the office). It must tell us what it is about Bert's habit which makes it able to help explain why he sits in his armchair every evening, rather than sitting somewhere else. We need to know what it is about having a habit which makes it apt to figure in explanations of why habit-bearers act as they do.

The need for an account of habit's explanatory nature is the main need for thinking about the force of habit. However, there is another question we must also ask: What *is* the force of habit? If this question seems strange, then that may be because talk of habit's force is at least somewhat metaphorical, and at best a little opaque. But the point of this question is that if we are after an explanatory theory of something which invokes its force, then the thing must *have* a force. Therefore there must be something informative and elucidating to say about it. Answering this question would allow us to see past the metaphor by identifying habit's force with some sort of motivational psychological item which could perform the peculiar explanatory role that we need to invoke it for.

Once again, the case of pain is instructive in helping us understand what is needed here. For it is natural to say of pain both that what makes it able to motivate people is its affective character, *and* that this character is a good candidate for being pain's force. This is no accident. After all, the force of pain is explanatorily relevant to why Jane takes painkillers, and so should have a place in the correct theory of what makes pain able to figure in such explanations. Therefore, the following thought seems plausible: For any explanatory theory of pain, hunger, or habit like the one we are after, it should mention something which is the force of the pain, hunger, or habit, and ideally in such a way that identifies what that force *is*. So the question of identifying habit's force is intimately connected to the question of its explanatory nature: We want to know *what* habit's force is, and how habit is *related* to its force such that habits can figure in the explanations they do. And this makes it clear just how important understanding habit's force is.³

Now, in this paper, when I talk of habits, I am restricting myself to habits of *action*, those which manifest our agency. However, there are plausibly habits of emotion, attention, and desire, which are not also habits of action,

³It is worth setting aside a potential misunderstanding at this stage. The examples I have used – pain, hunger, and desire – are naturally (though not necessarily) understood as having forces that work by being *felt*. Their forces appear in consciousness. In the end, I will argue that the same is true of habit's force. But importantly I am *not* assuming that all forces are like this, or that the force of habit must appear in consciousness. It is perfectly open at this stage that habit's force might be a kind of unconscious causal influence. Indeed, this issue must be left open, because the view I elaborate and reject in Sections 2 and 3 is of this kind, and it is crucial to avoid begging the question against it.

such as the tendency to anger quickly, to ignore an irritating sound, or to want certain foods (Carlisle, 2006, p. 28; Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 154; Sinclair, 2019, pp. 44–46).⁴ The reason for this restriction is that we should not assume from the outset that all types of habit have their force in the same way – their having different kinds of forces *might* even ultimately be part of what makes them different *types of habit*. My discussion is therefore about habits of action, and I don't want to be presumptuous about how far conclusions about those can be extended to cover all habits.⁵ So, when I use 'habit' without qualification in this paper, I shall mean 'habit of action'.

2. *The force of habit as automaticity*

So there are two intimately connected questions: What is it about habit which makes it able to figure in the action-explanations it does, and what is the force of habit? Despite their importance, philosophers have given little attention to these twin tasks. However, I think there is an account which lies nascent in the literature. For example, David Hume says '[w]herever the repetition of any particular act or operation produces a propensity to renew the same act or operation, without being impelled by any reasoning or process of the understanding [...] this propensity is the effect of Custom' (Hume, 1902, p. 43).⁶ Hume's suggestion is that repeatedly doing something generates a tendency or propensity to do it again in such a way that is not 'impelled' by practical deliberation. That is, Hume suggests a theory of what it is about habit that gives it its explanatory role: habit's being a tendency to do things automatically.

Similarly, Brett claims that a dentist who deliberates about whether to wash his hands between patients 'is not acting from force of habit' (Brett, 1981, p. 364). Brett thereby proposes that a part of what it is for the force of habit to operate is for the habit-bearer to act without deliberation. In the same vein, Pollard argues that 'the test of whether ϕ -ing has become a habit' for someone is whether it has become automatic for them to ϕ (Pollard, 2006b, p. 61). The idea is that habits only exert their force when they bypass deliberation, and this suggests that we identify habit's force with some sort of deliberation-bypassing mechanism which we could call 'automaticity'.

Finally, in Felix Ravaisson's little book *Of Habit* (1838/2008), he argues that 'the continuity or repetition of action exalts and strengthens it' making

⁴Some philosophers have even found it congenial to talk of the habits of inanimate substances (Peirce, 1992/1998, p. 277).

⁵In fact, I think the account of habits of action I will offer later probably can be extended to cover habits of emotion, attention, and desire, but that is a further thesis I will not defend here.

⁶It is usually understood that Hume uses 'custom' and 'habit' interchangeably (Sinclair, 2011, pp. 65–66).

movement ‘gradually easier, quicker and more assured’ (Ravaisson, 2008, p. 49). Then, ‘as effort fades away in movement [...] the action becomes more of a tendency, an inclination that no longer awaits the commandments of the will but rather anticipates them [...]’ (Ravaisson, 2008, p. 51). Ravaisson’s view, roughly, is that because repeatedly doing something diminishes the effort required to do it, we can anticipate the course of events more easily. This means that, when we are in the relevant scenarios, this anticipation ‘reproduces the action itself’ (ibid.), bypassing deliberation. Therefore, the force of habit is identified with a deliberation-bypassing mechanism that has a special role for anticipation (cf. (Velleman, 1989, pp. 70–72)).⁷

These remarks all seem to converge on the following view:

The Automaticity View

For any habit-bearer, S, in the habit of doing something, A, in context-type, C:

*S’s habit is a tendency to automatically A when in an instance of C, where S A’s in C because of the operation of automaticity.*⁸

To do something automatically, in the relevant sense, is to do it without having deliberated about whether to do so. It should be said immediately that this is a specific, semi-technical sense of ‘automatic’, and should be distinguished from other senses relevant to related debates. For instance, to say that someone acts automatically in the relevant sense is different from saying they act mindlessly, or especially quickly, or without knowing what they are doing, or without control.⁹

This account answers the first question by saying that habits figure in the explanations they do because they are tendencies to automatically do what one has done before. In answering the second, the Automaticity View identifies the force of habit as *automaticity*, where ‘automaticity’ is the place-holder name for whichever mechanism takes the habit-bearer from being in an instance of *C* to actually *A*-ing.¹⁰ What makes habits able to figure in the relevant action explanations is that the automaticity mechanism is triggered in habit-relevant contexts and issues in automatic action.

What makes the Automaticity View so popular? I think it is because most philosophers agree that there is a close connection between the habitual and the automatic. For example, Brett says that someone ‘is not acting from

⁷Similar views are expressed by many psychologists (Verplanken, 2018).

⁸I assume, following Christos Douskos (2019a, 2019b), that habits are canonically individuated by *what* one habitually does and *the context in which one does it*. Throughout, I use ‘*A*’ to stand in for things one does such as ride a bike, play cards, or raise one’s arm (Hornsby, 1980), and ‘*C*’ for habit-individuating context-types.

⁹See Dreyfus (2002), Di Nucci (2013), Fridland (2017), Pacherie & Mylopoulos (2020), and Wu (2016). See Douskos (2018) for an overview.

¹⁰There will be a number of different ways to cash out what this mechanism is, for example in terms of anticipation or sub-personal cue-based systems, but they will all be ways of filling out the Automaticity View. For my purposes it does not matter how one might fill it out, for I will be rejecting the view *tout court*.

force of habit if he is going through these deliberative manoeuvres' (Brett, 1981, p. 364). Similarly, Julia Peters says that 'When we act habitually, our actions are typically automatic. [...] [T]hey are automatic in the sense that they are not preceded by an explicit act of deliberation and decision.' (Peters, 2014, p. 165).¹¹ Pollard thinks that, necessarily, 'a *habitual action* is [...] *automatic*, that is, it does not involve the agent in deliberation about whether to act' (Pollard, 2003, p. 415). Wayne Wu argues that automaticity is a property actions have if and only if they are not directed by intentions (Wu, 2016, p. 104). Whilst Wu does not seem to think that intentions can only result from deliberation, on the common assumption that the conclusion of deliberation is an intention,¹² Wu's definition of automaticity excludes any automatic act from being the result of deliberation. And to the extent that Wu thinks of habitual actions as less-than-intentional, he thinks that they are automatic (Wu, 2011, p. 62). Therefore, they cannot be results of deliberation. Call this view the Non-Deliberative View:

The Non-Deliberative View

For any habit-bearer, S, and any thing S can do, A:

S A-s habitually only if S A-s automatically (that is, S A-s and does not deliberate about whether to A)

The basic motivation for the Non-Deliberative view is clear: There are a wealth of examples of habits manifesting in the agent's acting automatically. Exceedingly often, if one bites one's nails, says grace before dinner, or takes a particular route to work out of habit, then one does it without deliberation about whether to do so. In the face of so many examples, it can seem *obvious* that doing something automatically is a necessary condition on doing it habitually.

Given the almost overwhelming consensus concerning the Non-Deliberative View, it is very natural to think that automaticity may play the central role in an explanatory account of habit that the Automaticity View gives it. Indeed, if it did, this would explain *why* everything done habitually is done automatically. This is because if the explanatory role of habit is so connected to automaticity, then whenever one acts habitually, one must act automatically. So the Automaticity View is motivated by a plausible and widespread account of habit, and moreover it provides an explanation of why that view is true. In turn, this is reason to think it provide a very plausible answer to the twin questions of what makes habits able to figure in the action-explanations they do and of what the force of habit is. And this makes it very attractive indeed.

¹¹Peters says 'typically', yet her defence of Pollard's view of virtue suggests she is sympathetic to the stronger claim.

¹²See Dancy (2018) and Paul (2013) for discussion.

However, the Automaticity View's connection with the Non-Deliberative View is also its downfall. It really *is* necessary that if someone acts out of habit then the force of habit operates on them. Therefore, if the Automaticity View is true, it must be the case that whenever someone acts out of habit they act automatically. This is because the force of habit must operate on them, and on this view, it is essentially a deliberation-bypassing mechanism. Therefore, the Automaticity View *requires* the Non-Deliberative View, because whenever automaticity operates on someone they act automatically. The problem is that the Non-Deliberative View is false. Habits do not always issue in the habit-bearer's acting automatically. So the force of habit cannot be automaticity; both views fall together.

3. *Habit and deliberation*

I intend to undermine the Non-Deliberative View by arguing that it faces numerous counterexamples. Christos Douskos (2017b, 2018) has recently pursued this strategy with a helpful case which I discuss first. However, I do not think it is decisive, so I will develop four more counterexamples of increasing strength. Accumulatively, they show the Non-Deliberative View, and therefore the Automaticity View, is false.

Douskos's case is this. Helen habitually stays at a certain hotel whenever she is in London. The routine has given her a fondness for staying there: It puts her at ease; it feels normal and homely. Helen then finds out that other hotels are cheaper, and ponders which to pick for her next visit. She deliberates, but decides to go to her usual place on the strength of those emotional attachments grounded in her habit (Douskos, 2018, p. 36).

One way of casting Douskos's claim is that what Helen does is a manifestation of her habit despite ensuing from deliberation because it is a response to emotional motivational factors that are *internal* to her habit. Roughly, those factors are internal to the habit because they are generated by the *habitual nature* of the activity, and not the activity taken in isolation.¹³ Even if there were no habit-independent reasons to go to her usual hotel, reasons someone who had never been there could have, there seems to Helen to be something good about doing what she always does. Helen would not have *A*-ed had she lacked the habit, she *A*-ed as she habitually does, and she *A*-ed because she is in the habit of *A*-ing. That is, Helen acted for habit-dependent reasons which she weighed in deliberation.

However, it is not clear whether this argument works. Whilst a Non-Deliberative theorist may agree that Helen's emotional attachments

¹³This sense of 'internal' is designed to map onto a standard use of 'internal relation' according to which a relation between *X* and *Y* is internal whenever the relation holds just in virtue of their *natures* (MacBride, 2020).

are dependent on her habit, they may also think, plausibly enough, that the emotional attachments she deliberates on themselves are doing all the work in the explanation of why she decides as she does.¹⁴ After all, from Helen's perspective, it doesn't matter whether her attachments are grounded in her *habit*. They could have had the same effect even if they were dependent on something other than a habit. But if the emotional attachments Helen deliberates on are doing all the explanatory work, existentially dependent though they are on her habit, the Non-Deliberative theorist has a case for denying that Helen has really acted out of habit.

Now, views are liable to diverge greatly on whether Helen's attachments' dependence on her habit means that her acting on *them* entails that she acts out of *habit*. To decide this would require considering issues such as whether the grounds of an explanation is itself part of the explanation, and other difficult matters. But rather than address those issues, my point is that Douskos's example is dialectically unsafe, plausible though it is. Therefore, I do not want to put too much stock in his example by itself. Instead, my aim is to develop four more cases which jointly undermine the Non-Deliberative View.

Here is the second counterexample. I might have a habit of running once a week, and usually habitually run on Mondays. However, one week I have other commitments and must deliberate about whether and when to run, and I decide to run on Tuesday. When I run on Tuesday, I run out of habit, despite my having deliberated. The Non-Deliberative View is committed to denying that when I run on Tuesday I run habitually, but this seems undesirable.

One way the Non-Deliberative Theorist might push back is by denying the appropriateness of the habit's specification as a *habit of running once a week*, preferring the *habit of running on Monday*. But there are two problems. Firstly, my specification of the habit is perfectly natural, despite being superficially different from the canonical schema of 'the habit of *A*-ing in *C*'. But this is just because the context-type with which we specify the habit gives a *range* of days (a week) rather than any determinate days. But this does not stretch our concept of habit – I can habitually have a glass of water every hour (where there is no specific time within the hour that I have it) or have a habit of calling my mum once a week. These are perfectly good habit-ascriptions and we should not feel pushed to purge them. Secondly, the alternative habit-specification will not help because it also utilises a range-concept of *Monday*. For instance, if I have a habit of running on Monday, I may have to sometimes deliberate about when in the day to run, and whether to run at all. So the alternative specification opens up the same problem.

¹⁴Thanks to James Turner for pressing me on this.

Here is the third example. Consider my habit of doing my morning yoga stretches. Doing those stretches can figure in a plan for a particularly busy morning, say, one where I have to pack and leave for an early train. I might think about what I should do the next morning, deciding whether to pack my shoes now or then, when I should brush my teeth, and whether I should do my yoga routine. Having thought about what to do, I could make a list: ‘I must remember to pack, call a cab, shine my shoes, and yes, *I must do my stretches.*’ If I manage to seamlessly integrate my yoga into my busy morning schedule, then I have acted habitually and from deliberation. This is because the question of whether to do my usual stretches came up for me, I deliberated and settled on doing them, and my decision effectively gives me the space in the busy morning for my habit to manifest more easily in the context of other less familiar activities.

One might worry that my deliberation is just a *precondition* of my habit’s manifesting on this occasion, and that I do not stretch deliberately. However, I think the worry is misplaced: I stretch on that occasion partly because of a commitment to do so which was the conclusion of practical reasoning; if someone asked me what led to my stretching that morning, a good answer would be ‘I thought about it and decided to’. I think that there isn’t much else that can be required for the claim that I did my yoga stretches the next day out of deliberation, so long as there are the requisite rational connections between the deliberation, commitment, and action. There is no reason why deliberately planning to do something such that one leaves space for a habit to manifest means that the ensuing action cannot be a manifestation of the habit and one which results from deliberation. But the Non-Deliberative View cannot accommodate this fact.

The fourth counterexample is a case where frustrated deliberation is resolved by an agent’s habit. Consider Bert, who has the following conscious train of thought about where to eat lunch:

- 1) Should I go to *Boring Bistro* or *Cold Café*?
- 2) *Boring Bistro*’s food is good but its atmosphere is a bit dull
- 3) *Cold Café* is livelier but very chilly
- 4) Actually, I’ll just go to *Default Diner* like I always do.

Bert’s practical reasoning is clearly invalid. His reasoning is ‘frustrated’ by indecision and yet a conclusion is reached because he knows about his habit of eating at *Default Diner* which, faced with indecision, he reverts to. I will argue that Bert’s subsequent trip to *Default Diner* is both habitual and the conclusion of deliberation.

Firstly, even though Bert’s reasoning is invalid, it still concludes with his intentionally going to *Default Diner*, so his doing so is obviously not automatic. Moreover, his trip to *Default Diner* is habitual because

Bert settled on it rather than the other cafés because his habit, coupled with his knowledge of it, had set *Default Diner* as his default option.¹⁵ Without Bert's knowledge of his habit, *Default Diner* would simply be one more café to deliberate about, and so could not figure as somewhere which functions as a default conclusion in a case of frustrated reasoning. Given *Default Diner* does function as a default option, and does so because of Bert's habit, the habit figures in an explanation of why Bert goes to *Default Diner*, not in any strange or deviant way, but by doing what habits often do: setting, and motivating us to act on, default options (Amaya, 2020, p. 11180). So Bert's trip to *Default Diner* is both habitual and deliberative.

One might worry that a better interpretation of Bert's train of thought is that, instead of thinking of (C) as the result of reasoning, it instead represents his *abandoning* deliberation, thereby making his subsequent lunch trip *not* the result of deliberation. One piece of evidence for this is that (1–3) are not offered in support of (C), and so (C) does not look relevantly connected to the premises.¹⁶ But I don't think this is how in-the-moment practical reasoning really works. It is not a question of offering up premises in support of some given conclusion, precisely because the conclusion is not yet known. Rather, it is a matter of considering one's reasons in order to work out what to do. This process can be more or less procedurally sound, and sometimes, as in Bert's case, we simply grope around, get frustrated, and default back to what is easiest. The conclusion to take the easy route is still the conclusion of one's practical reasoning, even if all of the reasons considered were dead-ends, none of which led directly to one's conclusion. Therefore, I think we should accept that (C) does not represent Bert's abandonment of reasoning, but rather his deliberation's deflated *dénouement*.

The fifth and final counterexample is somewhat more involved than the previous four. Therefore, it is worth developing in more detail, especially because it depends on a feature of action-explanation which is often obscured in the literature. Say I crossed my legs as I sat down. Someone can now ask me:

¹⁵Douskos (2018, pp. 34–35) considers an apparently similar example with a key difference. His idea is that habits can shape which options we consider in deliberation, and that when we then act, we act both out of habit and deliberation. My example, in contrast, is one in which Bert considers non-habitual options, and defaults back to the habitual one despite this. This difference is important, because Douskos's example misses the mark: a habit's constraining the options one considers does not mean that what one does is habitual. Compare: My love for my partner constrains what I do to them, but that does not mean that everything I do to them is done out of love. If I am a bit rude to my partner on an occasion, this is not done out of love just because my option space was constrained by the fact that, in loving them, I would not even consider humiliating them. What we need is the idea that habit (like love) sets and motivates one to act on *default* courses of action, which is what my argument captures.

¹⁶Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this objection.

Standard Question: Why did you cross your legs?

Philosophers tend to think that the *Standard Question* requests a reason for my action.¹⁷ There are a number of things wrong with that idea,¹⁸ but I want to focus on one which is too little recognised¹⁹: the *Standard Question* obscures the fact that why someone crosses their legs has many explanations, each of which is an answer to a different contrastive question whose meanings can be exposed in English by means of emphasis. A more representative variety of requests for explanation is this:

- 1) Why *did* you cross your legs (when you did, rather than at some other time)?
- 2) Why did *you* cross your legs (whereas this other person didn't)?
- 3) Why did you *cross* your legs (rather than keep them apart)?
- 4) Why did you cross *your* legs (rather than anybody else's legs)?
- 5) Why did you cross your *legs* (rather than your arms)?

These questions all ask for my reasons for doing something – crossing my legs – but answers to these questions will not necessarily cite the same reasons (Cross, 1991, pp. 239–241; Van Fraassen, 1980, p. 128). My answer to (1) may be that I cross my legs whenever I sit down, and I sat down a little while ago; my answer to (3) may be that it is more comfortable to sit that way; and my answer to (4) may be that it would be a bit awkward to just fold someone else's legs over. The precise way to put this is that each of these reasons explains a different contrastive indirect question: My answer to (1) explains *why I crossed my legs when I did rather than at some other time*; my answer to (3) explains *why I crossed my legs rather than keeping them apart*.²⁰ Importantly, whilst these reasons explain different indirect questions, these indirect questions all concern the very same thing done – my crossing my legs. So the reasons jointly shed light on why I did one thing, by each explaining different indirect questions concerning it.

If that is right, then full explanations of why someone does one thing will often appeal to many different factors which figure in explanations of different indirect questions concerning their doing that thing. And this gives us the

¹⁷As an extremely influential example, Donald Davidson begins 'Actions, Reasons and Causes' with: 'What is the relation between a *reason* and an *action* when the *reason* explains the *action* by giving the *agent's reason* for doing what he did?' (Davidson, 1980, p. 685 emphasis added).

¹⁸There are two existing but under-appreciated objections to it. The first is that reasons are reasons for which we do things and that, as Jennifer Hornsby (1980) argues, the things we do are not actions; actions are our *doings of things*. So reasons do not explain actions (Hornsby, 1997; Sandis, 2012). The second is that, as Alfred Mele points out, there is typically no single reason for which anyone does anything, but a 'whole raft of reasons' (Mele, 2017, p. 55).

¹⁹For action-theoretic discussion, see Bennett (1988, pp. 32–35), Dretske (1972), Sandis (2012), and Snedegar (2017). The phenomenon of contrastivity which has also been extensively discussed in the philosophy of science (Achinstein, 1977; Cross, 1991; Van Fraassen, 1980).

²⁰See Belnap and Steel (1976) and Cross (1991).

space to see yet another way that habit and deliberation can both figure in an explanation of why someone does something: They may figure in explanations of different indirect questions concerning the same thing done.

For example, Clyde, a mean boss, has a habit of firing someone whenever he is angry. One day, he becomes furious and, his habit kicking in, he decides to fire someone. But who? After a brief think, he chooses to fire Alex because on balance he dislikes him the most.²¹ We can now ask:

- a) Why did Clyde *fire* Alex (rather than leave him alone)?
- b) Why did Clyde fire *Alex* (rather than anyone else)?

The fact that Clyde has a nasty habit of firing people when angry is one reason that he fires Alex, but it is not a reason he fired *Alex rather than anyone else*.²² So that fact can be given in answer to (a) but not to (b). The answer to (b) is that Clyde dislikes Alex more than his other employees. Now, Clyde arrived at his reason for firing *Alex* through deliberation, and so his deliberating figures in an explanation of why he fired *Alex*, even though it did not figure in an explanation of why he *fired* him. And a reason he *fired* Alex is that he has this bad habit, and so his habit figures in an explanation of why he *fired* Alex, but not in why he fired *Alex*. But Clyde only did one thing: He fired Alex.²³ After all, contrastivity is a semantic and pragmatic feature of explanation-involving bits of language, not of the things we do. Clyde's habit and Clyde's deliberation both figure in explanations of different indirect questions (respectively: why he *fired* Alex and why he fired *Alex*), which means they figure in mutually illuminating explanations concerning the same thing that Clyde did. But this means that the Non-Deliberative View's claim that doing something habitually and doing that thing as a result of deliberation are incompatible is false. Clyde fired Alex out of habit, and he fired him as a result of deliberation.

²¹I have adapted this example from Dretske (1972, p. 419).

²²I have not said that the fact that Clyde has a nasty habit of firing people when angry is *Clyde's own reason* for firing someone. In the case I am describing, Clyde does not treat that fact as a reason for him to fire anyone. However, it is one of the explanatory reasons why he does that (Alvarez, 2010, p. 30).

²³A reviewer has suggested that one might deny this: Because 'firing Alex' and 'firing someone' are different descriptions of Clyde's action, firing *Alex* might be a different thing that Clyde did from firing *someone*. This would undercut my argument, because if firing Alex and firing someone are different things done, then the first might be done from deliberation and the second from habit, thereby defusing my counterexample. However, I think this suggestion is a mistake. Firstly, it is unattractive because it becomes impossible to say that if Clyde fired Alex and Billy, then he did the same thing to both of them. On the suggested view, he would have fired-Alex and fired-Billy, but the reason Alex and Billy have a common complaint against Clyde is that he did *the same thing to them both*. Secondly, more importantly, as Davidson (1980) we are familiar with the idea that actions are described in terms of their effects. But they are also described in terms of their patients, the objects they are directed towards, and the two descriptions differ only with respect to the way the action's patient – Alex – is described. But this no more introduces two things Clyde did than the sentences 'Clyde fired Alex' and 'Alex's boss fired Alex' do. It is quite implausible that redescrptions of the *agent* introduce different things the agent did, and the same goes with redescrptions of the patient.

With all my counterexamples on the table, how might a Non-Deliberative Theorist respond? They might suspect that there is a quite general line of argument which allows them to push back.²⁴ The idea is that the best way to think of these examples is this: What these agents do habitually is *decide or deliberate* about what to do, and the thing they then do is done from deliberation rather than habit. Therefore, nothing in these cases is done both habitually and from deliberation. For instance, perhaps Clyde does not fire Alex out of habit and deliberation, but rather habitually *deliberates* about who to fire, and then non-habitually fires Alex out of deliberation. Similarly, perhaps my habit gets me to *decide* to run this week, but then my deliberation gets me actually running on Tuesday, but not out of habit. And perhaps habit gets me to deliberate about doing my yoga, but deliberation gets me actually doing it. The suggestion is that these putative counterexamples to the Non-Deliberative View fail because in each case what is done habitually is *deciding or deliberating* about what to do, and what is done from deliberation is *not* done habitually.

However, I think this response won't do. Notice that it requires reinterpreting the cases so that they no longer involve people with habits of running, doing yoga, or firing people, but rather people with habits of *deciding* to run, *deciding* to do yoga, or *deliberating about whether* to fire people. But people with these habits have different histories and profiles. Clyde has a habit of firing people, but perhaps he has a partner, Bonnie, who has a habit of *deciding* to fire people. Bonnie and Clyde are different: Where Clyde has no need to first make up his mind about whether to fire people, Bonnie does; where Clyde must have a history of actually firing people, Bonnie need not, because her habit is consistent with her never following through on her decision. Moreover, because Clyde has a habit of firing people, and not deciding to fire them, if he does sometimes decide or deliberate (as in my counterexample) he will not do this habitually. After all, he has no history of doing so which can have sedimented into a habit.

What goes wrong with the response I am considering is that it requires reinterpreting Clyde's habit as *really* being Bonnie's, and *mutatis mutandis* for the yoga and running cases. But there is no principled motivation for this. Perhaps when he is angry, Clyde usually has no trouble just firing someone without a second thought, it is just that this time he feels he needs to think about it for a moment (perhaps he can't decide whether he hates Alex or Bert the most). But the response cannot make sense of this possibility. This is because, to explain away the counterexample, it saddles Clyde with a habit of deliberation which means he must have a history of *deliberating* about whether to fire people when angry. That is, it saddles Clyde with *Bonnie's* habit. Then we may be left wondering whether the habit I specified Clyde had is even possible according to this

²⁴Thanks to a reviewer for this suggestion.

response. If it were, then nothing rules out that someone with a habit of *firing* people could still find themselves in the position of having to think about just *who* to fire. But that is all that happens in the Clyde example. It therefore seems that to be successful the response needs to deny that there are *any such habits*. But this restriction is both unnatural and *ad hoc*, motivated just by the demands of the Non-Deliberative View. As such, we should reject the reinterpretation of the counterexamples as really involving habits of deliberation or decision.

I have given five counterexamples to the Non-Deliberative View which jointly show that it is false, and defended them against attempts to undermine their status as counterexamples. It is simply not true that everything done habitually is done automatically. Now, as the Non-Deliberative View is so popular, this is an important result. However, it has even more important ramifications for our attempt to account for the force of habit, because it entails that the Automaticity View is also false. This is because the counterexamples show that habits can play their explanatory role in cases where the habit-bearer *does* deliberate, and so the force of habit cannot be identified with the operation of automaticity, a deliberation-bypassing mechanism. Despite its apparent attraction, the Automaticity View fails to solve our two tasks of providing an explanatory theory of habit and identifying what the force of habit is.

4. *The familiarity view*

The argument of the previous section leaves us with neither an explanatory theory of habit nor any understanding of its force. In the rest of this paper, I will argue for a new view, one which answers both of these questions in a plausible and powerful way. The theory I want to suggest is that habits are tendencies to do the habitual thing for a certain sort of normative and motivating *reason*²⁵ – that *A-ing in C* is familiar to do – where these tendencies are triggered to manifest by the *feeling* that doing these things in these contexts is the familiar thing to do. Further, my suggestion is that we should identify habit's force with the feeling of familiarity with doing what one usually does in the relevant contexts. So, when we think about Bert's habit of sitting in his armchair, and we describe the force of habit operating on him

²⁵In this paper, I assume a view of reasons for action on which they are facts which favour doing certain things, and which, when an agent treats them as so favouring, may explain why the agent acts as they do. When a normative reason is the agent's own reason for acting, it will be both a normative and a motivating reason. See Alvarez (2010), Dancy (2000), McDowell (2013), Raz (2009), Sandis (2013), Stout (2009) and for variations on this theme. Further, the kind of reason at issue is a *pro tanto* practical reason; that is, one which favours doing something, but not decisively, and which can be weighed against other reasons (Snedegar, 2021).

by drawing him to sit in his usual chair, we are describing the feeling of familiarity exerting its motivational power. I call this ‘the Familiarity View’.²⁶

Now, my case for the Familiarity View will be accumulative and abductive. It is accumulative because rather than giving a single definitive argument, I will assemble materials which, when taken together, make the view very plausible; it is abductive because one of the main ways in which the view is plausible is that it provides the best existing account of habit’s explanatory nature.

In Section 4.1, I want to lay out a number of features of familiarity which are important for my purpose. Then, in Section 4.2, I will argue both that these features jointly suggest that the Familiarity View is rather attractive, and moreover that it provides a powerful account of the explanatory nature of habit.

4.1. ON BEING AND SEEMING FAMILIAR

In this section, I want to describe a number of features of familiarity which will help motivate giving it a role in a theory of habit. The first thing is to distinguish between, on the one hand, *being* familiar with something, and on the other, *feeling* or *seeming* familiar with it. Being familiar with a person, a city, or a language entails that one has engaged with the thing before, and typically in an extended way. For example, the way one becomes familiar with a language is by speaking it. However, familiarising oneself with French typically requires more than just saying ‘Je t’aime’ and ‘Oui’ every so often. Rather, one must to some degree immerse oneself in the language. Relatedly, familiarity is gradable: One can be more or less familiar with London, and this will depend on the extent to which one has explored it. Further, there seems to be a distinction between the proprietary ways in which one familiarises oneself with something, and secondary ways. For example, although the primary way of getting familiar with London is by walking its streets and drinking in its pubs, one could also try to get to know it by reading travel guides or novels. However, the kind of familiarity one has in the latter case

²⁶This view finds expression in recent work by Carlisle (2006, 2014) Douskos (2017b, 2018), however neither defend it as a reasonably comprehensive theory of habit and its force. The Familiarity View is not the only view which ties habit to specific aspects of a habit-bearer’s experiential perspective. Firstly, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012) and Komarine Romdenh-Romluc (2013) argue that partly constitutive of having a habit is that new opportunities for action both become perceptually apparent to, and salient for, the habit-bearer. For a detailed discussion of their view and its pitfalls, see my (2022). Secondly, there is an Aristotelian tradition which sees moral habituation as involving emotional, perceptual, or imaginative sensitivities to the moral significance of situations (Hampson, 2019, 2022; Hursthouse, 1999). One thing that all these views share is the idea that repeatedly doing something bootstraps in a sort of phenomenological sensitivity to the significance of certain things, but they importantly differ in the nature of that sensitivity and what it’s a sensitivity to. Although they may look like competing views of the same thing, I think it is perhaps plausible that they are complimentary views of slightly different things, for instance, skill, habit, and virtue. Now, the relations between these categories is a delicate question, so I will not pursue it here for reasons of space.

seems both different from, and more degraded than, the former. This suggests that familiarity admits of something like Bertrand Russell's (1911) distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.

On the other side of the distinction is the fact that things often *seem* or *feel* familiar. One nice way of getting a grip on this is by thinking about cases where such a feeling washes over one in flashes of recognition. For example, in the street I might notice someone smiling and waving at me without immediately recognising them as a close friend. Seconds later it might dawn on me who it is. Matthew Ratcliffe puts it like this: '[T]he whole experiential structure changes and takes on an air of familiarity as the face's significance is registered; "It's him!" Without that sudden reorientation, perhaps he would remain unfamiliar, unrecognised' (Ratcliffe, 2004, p. 39). These cases where the feeling of familiarity washes over one are not especially rare. We can have these experiences when we return home after a long time away, or when one hears a song on the radio which one knows but can't place. Such cases where the feeling of familiarity washes over one are useful ways of isolating the phenomenon. However, the experience is much more omnipresent than even these common episodes. Mostly, the feeling of familiarity does not attract significant focal attention. It usually sits in the background of experience making that to which we are repeatedly exposed seem normal, and making things which deviate from the norm come to seem alien or strange.

This suggests that the feeling of familiarity has an affective profile. When we feel something as familiar it typically feels normal, homely, comfortable, and the unfamiliar can feel alien and strange. Marcel Proust brings this out when someone gives his character, the young Marcel, a magic lantern for his room. As Marcel describes:

'[M]y sorrows were only increased thereby, because this mere change of lighting was enough to destroy the familiar impression I had of my room, thanks to which, save for the torture of going to bed, it had become quite endurable. Now I no longer recognised it, and felt uneasy in it, as in a room in some hotel or chalet, in a place where I had just arrived by train for the first time.' (Proust, 1984, pp. 10–11)

One thing this shows is that when we have become familiar with a room, say, we form a sort of emotional attachment to it which can be destroyed by even slight changes. Places can start to feel alien, where before they were felt to be places of safety.²⁷ That is, because of the feeling of familiarity's affective character, it implicates small pleasures and pains which draw one to the familiar and repulse one from the strange.

That said, it is easy to slip into thinking that the feeling of familiarity is always positively valenced, or that it must feel good.²⁸ But this isn't right. The familiar can feel stale, monotonous, boring, or downright

²⁷Compare discussions of the uncanny in Freud (2003) and Mangan (2015).

²⁸Carlisle's (2006, p. 23) comments suggest she tends towards this view.

prosaic; a relationship's lifelessness can make itself known in a sense of the oppressive unremitting familiarity of it all. What determines the particular affective character of any given experience of familiarity, then? The most general answer to this is, I think, the feeling's place in the subject's psychology. It is very common for the affective character of some type of experience to change depending on its context. For example, a nice tasting beer can taste vile if you are expecting water; whether your anger feels good can depend on whether you also feel righteous or petty. The same goes for the experience of familiarity: The feeling of familiarity can feel generally positive if it is mixed with a sense of safety, say; it can feel stale when it is mixed with boredom and listlessness. Exactly what the recipes are for the different affective flavours the experience may take on need not concern us here. The point is that the experience is affective, and its particular character depends on the other aspects of the subject's psychology.

What of the relation between something's being and seeming familiar? I think the most natural thing to say is that the feeling of familiarity serves to reveal familiar things *as being* familiar, such that we can come to recognise a familiar person or place under that guise. This is not to deny that there are bad cases: Some friends stay unrecognised in the street no matter how clearly you see them, and, in *déjà vu*, scenes seem familiar when they are not. However, the existence of bad cases does not impugn the claim that our capacity to experientially discriminate the familiar can and does reveal the familiar, just as the fact that an excellent basketball player misses some free-throws does not undermine the claim that they can and do often succeed (McDowell, 2010, p. 245).

Now, we are familiar with a great variety of things: people, cities, languages, and practices. But we are also familiar with doing things in particular sorts of contexts, for example, with running in the morning, or swearing when talking. Call familiarity with doing something, *A*, in some context, *C*, 'familiarity with a course of action'. The final thing I want to do before tying these threads together is to argue that being familiar with a course of action gives one a reason to take that course.

Familiarity with a course of action gives us reason to act because it amounts, in a certain respect, to knowledge of a well-trodden, vouchsafed route through a context.²⁹ Clare Carlisle brings this out powerfully when she argues that there is a 'safety and ease that is engendered by familiarity' which contributes to '[insulating] us from the threat of the unknown' (Carlisle, 2006, p. 23). To see this, think of Bert's habit of eating at *Default Diner*. He has all sorts of options for lunch, but *Default Diner* is the one he knows best. It represents the safe option: It will not surprise him; he knows what it is like and what to expect. The other options –

²⁹I discuss the connection between familiarity and knowledge further in my (2022).

Boring Bistro and *Cold Café* – may (despite their names) be warm and lively places with much better food and coffee than *Default Diner*. But because they are unfamiliar to Bert, they represent relatively unsafe options, untried and untested. That is, there is a distinctively epistemic flavour to familiarity-based reasons. Given one's familiarity with one option over others entails knowing what the first option is like and being relatively in the dark about the others, it is epistemically less risky to take the path more travelled.³⁰ Therefore, even if Bert has stronger practical reasons to go to one of these alternatives, their unfamiliarity means that Bert has *some* reason to go to *Default Diner* as he always does. And an outweighed reason is still a reason. The same thing can be said about Bert's habit of sitting in his usual armchair: It represents the known and the normal, and therefore gives him a reason to sit there, even if the sofa is much more comfortable. In both cases, Bert has, respectively, the reason *that having lunch at Default Diner is familiar to me* and *that sitting in this armchair of an evening is familiar to me*.

If we put the foregoing ideas together, we have the following picture. When someone is familiar with a course of action, they have a reason to take it grounded in their familiarity. So long as things are going well, when in an instance of the context in which they can take that course of action, they will feel that doing so is the familiar thing to do. The experience is affective, and therefore reveals this fact in the kind of motivational light peculiar to affective experiences. Therefore, in a good case, where the experience does actually reveal the course of action as familiar, it reveals an aspect of the world which has value and grounds a practical reason. More, it reveals it *as* being an aspect of that sort in a motivational light. This is not the flat, colourless presentation of a reason for action to a disinterested agent, but the rich sort of presentation of a reason in affective experience which itself inclines the agent to act on it, just as fear, love, and pain do (Johnston, 2001; Poellner, 2016). So not only does the person familiar with *A*-ing in *C* have a reason, when in *C*, to *A*. In a good case, they will also be inclined to do so for the reason that *A*-ing in *C* is familiar to them. Their reason is motivationally potent.

³⁰One (perhaps overly formal) way to put this is that familiarity with *A* and unfamiliarity with *B* means that, even if *A* and *B* have the same expected value, one's credence in the value of *A* being at least as high as expected is higher than one's credence in the value of *B* being at least as high as expected, all else being equal. That favours *A* over *B*. Moreover, it is generally much easier to assign a value to a course of action one is familiar with, so *A* will also have a more settled expected value, in contrast to the potentially quite uncertain expected value of *B*. Thanks to James Lewis for this way of putting it. This is closely related to a point Uku Tooming (2020, p. 701) makes in an interesting recent paper about knowing what one wants: The more familiar one is with the content of one's desire, the more easy it is to know whether one has that desire. That is, past experience gives epistemic security to self-ascriptions of desire. One way of thinking of this is that familiarity can provide epistemic reasons to self-ascribe desires.

4.2. THE FAMILIARITY VIEW DEFENDED

What does the motivational nexus surrounding familiarity with a course of action have to do with habit? Quite a lot, I think. Notice that Alice becomes familiar with singing in the shower because that is what she has often done; Bert has become familiar with sitting in his armchair because he keeps sitting there. But this is the very same way they each also form their respective habits of singing and sitting. So we can start by seeing that the proprietary way of becoming familiar with a course of action is just the same as the way we form habits: repetition. Habit-formation and becoming familiar with a course of action have the same ground, based as they are in a person's repeatedly doing something in relevantly similar contexts. This means that they are *internally related*: Necessarily, if someone has a habit of *A-ing* in *C*, they are also familiar with *A-ing* in *C*, where this is guaranteed by the related natures of habit and familiarity with a course of action.

This fact, coupled with the reflections on the nature of familiarity, entails that anybody with a habit of *A-ing* in *C*, when in an instance of *C*, has a reason to *A*, where this reason is *that A-ing in C is familiar*. Further, in a good case, they will also experience the course of action as being the familiar one to take, and thereby have their reason revealed to them in a motivational light which inclines them to act for that reason. Therefore, in a good case, someone with a habit who is present in the relevant context will be inclined to do what they are in the habit of doing for the reason that doing so is familiar to them.

The picture that is emerging is one of a rich motivational nexus surrounding all habit-bearers in virtue of the intimate connection between habit-formation and familiarisation with courses of action. Moreover, we are looking for a theory which can say what it is about habit that makes it explanatory, figuring in just the sorts of action-explanations it does. The intimate connection between habit and familiarity suggests that the motivational nexus I have identified might play a crucial part in the theory we are after. It suggests that we have not only identified the mere concurrence of habit and motivation, but something more. I think it suggests the Familiarity View:

The Familiarity View

For any habit-bearer, S, with a habit of doing something, A, in context-type, C:

S's habit is a tendency to A in C for the reason that A-ing in C is familiar to S, where this reason is revealed by S's feeling familiar with A-ing in C.

Remember the two questions I began with: What is it about habits which allows them to figure in just the explanations they do, and what is the force of habit? The Familiarity View answers the first question by situating habits inside the motivational nexus I have identified. As, on this view, habits are

tendencies to be motivated by certain sorts of reasons revealed in a specific sort of way, the Familiarity View provides a very clear explanation of why habits have the explanatory profile they do. For example, why does Alice's habit help explain why she sings in the shower rather than beatbox in the office? The reason is that, because she is familiar with singing in the shower, when showering, she will typically feel the motivational pull of familiarity.³¹ Therefore, it is because her habit is a tendency to be motivated in this way that it figures in the explanation of why she sings in the shower. Because she has never beatboxed in the office, she is not familiar with it, and that is therefore not something her habit can figure in an explanation of. In answer to the second question, the Familiarity View claims that the force of habit is the feeling of familiarity. After all, it is a central aspect of the motivational nexus in being the essential psychological ingredient which both presents, and motivates the agent to act on, their reason.

So the Familiarity View gives us plausible answers to the two questions we started with. However, it also has many other virtues. Firstly, the view accounts for one essential feature of habit (its force) in terms of another (the fact that the habitual is familiar). This makes for an elegant and simple view which only requires the resources of aspects of habit which are internal to it. Secondly, relatedly, because the fact that everything habitual is familiar is secured by internal relations between habit and familiarity with courses of action, this generalisation is immune to counterexamples. Compare this with the Automaticity View which depended on the generalisation that everything done habitually is done automatically. That claim was basically an *empirical* generalisation from a huge variety of examples, and this left it open to potential (and ultimately actual) counterexamples. But the generalisation connecting habit and familiarity with a course of action is not empirical, but rather based on reflection on the *natures* of habit and familiarity. Therefore, the claim does not admit of counterexamples because the connections are too tight. To be clear, I am not claiming the whole Familiarity View is immune to counterexamples – it may not be. Rather, I am claiming immunity for a central node from which much of the view springs. And if that is right, then this strong core puts the view on a firm footing.

Thirdly, the idea that habit has a distinctive but elusive force is apt to sound mysterious, partly because of the metaphorical language. However, the Familiarity View has a naturalising effect. It makes habit's force un-mysterious by fitting it into a broader picture of the rational, affective, and motivational psychology of agents, whose elements are themselves

³¹The 'typically' here does not signal that when she acts out of habit she will only typically feel familiar with the course of action. That would undermine my claim that the feeling of familiarity *is* the force of habit. I only say habit-bearers will *typically* feel familiar with the course of action because we are sometimes in habit-relevant contexts and do not realise it. Being in those contexts hardly *necessitates* that one will feel familiar with it, even if one usually does.

better understood. This means the view represents actual progress by elucidating something we were in the dark about.

Fourthly, a part of what is distinctive about habit is that it is a conservative force; it motivates one to do only what one has done before. Habit-bearers have their behaviour ‘controlled by the past’. The Familiarity View does justice to this thought because the feeling of familiarity is a motivational element that is suitably past-oriented and cannot motivate one to do something brand new and spontaneous. For example, as I have said, if Alice feels that singing in the shower is familiar, this may motivate her to sing in the shower. But it certainly will not motivate her to beatbox in the office. Therefore, the motivational nexus surrounding familiarity with a course of action has just the right profile to account for the particular action-explanations habits figure in.

It is worth intercepting a natural objection at this point. The worry is that one can have habits of doing spontaneous things, like buying a pot plant or doing a handstand, or habits of, for example, going on holiday to strange new places. How can the Familiarity View, which emphasises the conservative power of habit, accommodate these apparently less conservative cases? I think quite simply: Although each holiday destination is (and will seem) unfamiliar, our habit-bearer is (and will typically feel) familiar with *going to unfamiliar places on holiday*. Although the individual holidays are all new and different, they each slot into a behavioural pattern of the agent, one which the agent *is* familiar with. Similarly, if someone has a habit of spontaneity, the effect of this is to keep them doing spontaneous things rather than more normal activities. Someone with a habit of spontaneity is just as stuck in their ways as someone with a regular routine, because it is just as predictable that they will do *something* spontaneous as it is that Bert will sit in his armchair, even if it is not predictable *what* they will do. All this is to say that these are cases where the habit-bearer has become familiar with doing unfamiliar things.

The fifth virtue of the Familiarity View is that it offers a number of ‘moving parts’ or variables whose variation across cases will affect what a person does. That is, the view is sufficiently complex that it has the power to explain a great variety of different cases by means of the variation of these parts, rather than treating habit as a ‘black box’ of action-explanation. For example, the Familiarity View provides a very attractive account of habit-misfires. Habit-misfires are instances where someone’s habit manifests in their doing what they habitually do, but not in the context in which they usually do it. William James makes this vivid: ‘Who is there that has never wound up his watch on taking off his waistcoat in the daytime, or taken his latchkey out on arriving at the door-step of a friend?’ (James, 2007, p. 115).³²

³²See Amaya (2020), Douskos (2017a), and Romdenh-Romluc (2013) for related discussions of slips.

When a habit misfires, its force is effectively exerted on the habit-bearer, but in a condition which is not of the type which canonically individuates the habit. When a habit misfires, we face a question: Why did it manifest in the ‘wrong’ conditions? This question is even more pressing when we remember that habits are individuated partly by context-types. Alice has a habit of singing *in the shower*; Bert goes to *Default Diner for work-day lunch*. But if that is right, how could a habit-bearer’s being in the *wrong* context mean that they manifest a habit appropriate for a *different* context? It is clearly an empirical possibility; as James says, habit-misfires are a fact of life. But we need to be able to make sense of them.

The Familiarity View offers a very powerful explanation based in the possibility of mistaking a course of action as familiar when it is not. After all, the feeling of familiarity is representational, and therefore open to *misrepresenting*. Therefore, if Alice has a habit of getting her keys out when she gets to her front door, it is possible that when she gets to a friend’s door she may have an experience of getting her keys out as being the familiar thing to do now, even though it is not. Because the feeling of familiarity is the force of habit, Alice’s experience inclines her to take out her keys, and may motivate her to do so. If this happens, Alice’s habit will have misfired: She will habitually take out her keys, but not in the habit-individuating context-type. The Familiarity View therefore provides a very good explanation of habit-misfires and dissolves the puzzle.

Finally, the Familiarity View explains the central motivation behind the Automaticity View: very much of what we do habitually is done automatically, without practical deliberation. Although the Non-Deliberative View is false, it is undeniable that habitual action is very often automatic. Any theory of habit should account for this, whilst leaving open the possibility for deliberation.

The Familiarity View has a very plausible explanation, based in the fact that the feeling of familiarity is an affective experience. After all, affective experiences quite generally have the power to motivate us to do things without deliberation. There is something about pain and fear, say, which motivates one to act with an immediacy that circumvents deliberation. Now, one *can* feel the pain of a burn and deliberate about whether to do what the pain commands. However, in doing so, one thereby resists the motivational impetus of pain in order to decide what to do; the pain is, all the while, providing one with an inclination to act *without* thinking about it. The same goes for other affective experiences; it seems to be in their nature (Carruthers, 2018).

On the Familiarity View, the force of habit is the feeling of familiarity. And because that experience is affective, this is what explains the fact that when the force of habit operates, the habit-bearer often acts automatically. They do so because the force of habit is an affective state which immediately inclines the subject to act. As I said earlier, it is not the cold, colourless presentation of a reason, but one with the colour and heat characteristic of

affective experiences. As such, when a habit-bearer feels a course of action to be familiar, they will be inclined to act immediately, without any practical deliberation. The Familiarity View does not therefore imply that habit-bearers must attend to their experiences of familiarity in order to act, or that they must treat the experiences as premises in reasoning, and so it avoids overintellectualizing the phenomenon. The feeling of familiarity has its motivational pull despite being, on the whole, in the recesses of consciousness. In this respect it is like low-level bodily discomfort, or feeling the creeps: There are many phenomenal experiences whose motivational role is not dependent on being the object of focal attention. Therefore, many of the intuitions which draw philosophers to the Automaticity View can be accommodated by the Familiarity View.³³

This is not to say that habit-bearer's cannot stand back from this inclination and deliberate. In fact, this is what happens in Douskos's case from Section 3. Helen deliberates about which hotel to stay in, and on the basis of deliberation about her emotional attachments to her usual one, she stays there. What she does is step back from the immediate inclination of the force of habit, consider the reasons in her possession, and decide to act on the basis of her affective connection to the normal hotel. In effect, she decides to act on the force of habit. In contrast, when Bert's habit resolves his frustrated reasoning about where to eat, the inclination to go to *Default Diner* basically overpowers his flailing attempts to work out where else to go, and therefore makes an impact on his deliberation and decision. Therefore, Bert, like Helen, also decides to act on the force of habit. However, unlike Helen, he only does so because the force of habit imposes itself as the strongest motivational force at a moment of indecision about two other options. This means that the Familiarity View explains why much of what we do habitually we do automatically, whilst also making space for the possibility of acting habitually and deliberately.

Before finishing, I want to address two natural worries about my view, both of which concern whether the feeling of familiarity can play the role I give it.³⁴ The first worry is that, as I noted earlier, the feeling of familiarity is not always positively valenced; sometimes the familiar can feel unbearably monotonous. How can this feeling play the motivating role I give it when it sometimes presents familiar courses of action as thereby *less* attractive?

This worry ultimately rests on a too-simple view of the nature of affective motivation. Valence is not the only factor. Firstly, my view of the feeling of

³³One may worry that the Familiarity View conflicts with the intuition many have that one can *A* habitually and yet be unaware that one is *A*-ing. However, this is not so. All the view strictly requires is that one have a prospective feeling that *A*-ing is the familiar thing to do in *C*, and that this feeling motivates them to *A* in *C*. It does not require that when one is in the process of *A*-ing, one feels *of one's action* that it is familiar, and so it does not require that one be conscious of the action. That said, I happen to think that the intuition is false, but I must leave that for another day.

³⁴Thanks to the reviewers for pressing me on both points.

familiarity's motivational potency is tightly connected to the fact that it presents a reason for action, and when one acts habitually, one is moved by that reason. The reason is *that it is familiar*, not *that it feels good to do the familiar*, and in principle there is nothing inconsistent with acting for that reason and that reason's being revealed by a state with negative valence. If we think of an experience's affective character narrowly in terms of valence, then it is not the affective character of the feeling of familiarity which gets one to act habitually: The reason does. However, if we think of the feeling's affective character more broadly, in terms of the values it represents and the pleasures and pains it implicates, then the feeling plays an intelligible motivating role even when it has a negative valence just because the fact that it represents things as familiar *at all* is connected with its affective character: It is either in virtue of this phenomenal character that it has that content, or it is in virtue of the content that it has that character (Bain, 2003; Farkas, 2008; Kriegel, 2013). Either way, the affective phenomenal character helps explain why agents act habitually independently of which valence any given experience may have.

Finally, the fact that negatively valenced feelings of familiarity can still motivate habit-bearers to act out of habit is not special to those feelings. In fact, it is a central feature of many negative emotions that they are self-perpetuating, motivating activities that keep one feeling bad. Sadness often motivates dwelling on the problem; anger often motivates aggressive behaviours which invite aggressive angering responses. Recent work on depression and low mood has made a particularly big deal about this, because low mood demotivates people from doing things, which increases their low mood in a vicious downward spiral (Nesse, 2000; Nimrod *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, the fact that the feeling of familiarity can motivate habitual action whilst feeling stale and monotonous is not especially worrying. That is not to say there is no puzzle about how this works: There *is* a general puzzle about how negative affects self-perpetuate. But the fact is that they clearly do, and this dispels the threat of unintelligibility my view might have seemed to have.³⁵

The second objection is based in the observation that habits tend to diminish and dull our experience. For instance, what one does habitually are often mundane things that one is barely aware of, if at all, such as biting one's nails, swearing, or rudely interrupting people. When we think about perceptual cases, such as adjusting to an annoying sound, or getting used to seeing the same old mess on the desk, habits also seem to be characterised by a certain lack of awareness. One might think, therefore, that this does not square well with the idea that whenever someone acts out of habit they are motivated by a *feeling* that is sufficiently strong to motivate action. If habit has a dulling effect on experience, why should it not have this effect on the feeling of familiarity?

³⁵Thanks to James Turner for discussion.

I think the problem with this objection is that it assumes that we must model the feeling of familiarity on sensations, identifiable and locatable experiential events such as tickles, pains, and visual halos. Such a model is implied by talk of the experience as being ‘a warm glow’ (Dokic, 2010, p. 41).³⁶ On the sensation model, it seems plausible that the feeling of familiarity becomes an increasingly intense sensation the more familiar one gets with doing something. Now, that clearly does conflict with the observation about habit’s dulling effect. However, the sensation model is independently quite implausible. As Bruce Mangan points out, ‘while we know without question *that* we feel it, just *how* it feels is a good deal more obscure’ (Mangan, 2001, p. 3). This does not seem to be the case with sensations like tickles and pains, which are quite easy to locate in one’s mental life and describe. In contrast, the feeling of familiarity is diffuse, hard to describe, and hard to locate in one’s stream of consciousness, or in any place on the body or in the world. If I see a friend walking down my street and recognise them as familiar, exactly where in my visual field is the familiarity located, and exactly where do I feel it? If these questions seem impossible to answer, I think the reason is that they don’t *have* answers. My friend looks familiar, and that is a feature of my experience of him. But there is no place where the feeling occurs, nowhere the familiarity is presented as being, and it certainly does not seem like a visible warm glowing halo surrounds them (Wittgenstein, 1958, pp. 180–183). This stands in stark contrast to the thought that the experience is anything like a sensation.

In fact, the mistake partly consists in thinking that the feeling of familiarity is a component of experience that is at all distinct from the dulling of other experiences through repeated exposure. Part of what it *is* to feel a sound, or room, or course of action become familiar is for it to fade somewhat into the background, taking up less focal attention. One place which may offer support for this view is the psychological theory that the feeling of familiarity is determined by factors such as the relative speed and ease of perceptual processing, which is monitored by metacognitive mechanisms which attribute familiarity to the stimulus when processing is either easy or easier than expected (Whittlesea, 1993; Whittlesea & Williams, 1998, 2000).³⁷ This suggests that feeling familiar with a stimulus or situation is partly determined by the increased ease and fluency with which we perceive it. But this increased ease and fluency is equally potentially the reason that experiences of the stimulus or situation dull: When things are easier to see because they are old news, they require less and less attention, and are thereby relegated to the fringes of consciousness (Block, 2022). This suggests we think of the feeling of familiarity, not as an independent sensation, but as

³⁶Talk of ‘the warm glow of familiarity’ is perhaps most common in psychology (Corneille *et al.*, 2005; De Vries *et al.*, 2010; Monin, 2003). Apparently, it dates back to Titchener (1918).

³⁷Similar views are suggested in Bergson (2005, p. 93) and Lyon (1996).

an experiential upshot of the fact that, with familiarity and exposure, other experiences become duller. And this independently plausible view of the feeling of familiarity dissolves the tension between giving it a role in habit and recognising habit's dulling effect on experience.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that consideration of habit's force is vital for understanding the explanatory nature of habit. I considered and rejected what I take to be the nascent but dominant conception of habit's force: the Automaticity View. And in its place I argued that we should accept the Familiarity View, on which habit's explanatory role is intimately connected to the fact that habitual courses of action are, and typically feel, familiar. On this view, habits figure in the explanations they do because they are tendencies to be motivated by one's familiarity with a course of action. Moreover, the Familiarity View identifies the force of habit as being the feeling of familiarity which plays an important motivational role. Further, I argued that this view is not only independently plausible, but also explanatorily powerful, giving us a much needed account of habit-misfires and an explanation of the pre-dominance, though not universality, of automaticity amongst the habitual. As such, I think the Familiarity View provides a very promising account of habit's explanatory nature.³⁸

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