

Is there a Wittgensteinian Legacy on Habit?

Alice Morelli



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/5177>

DOI: 10.4000/13ta1

ISSN: 2036-4091

Publisher

Associazione Pragma

Electronic reference

Alice Morelli, "Is there a Wittgensteinian Legacy on Habit?", *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* [Online], XVII-1 | 2025, Online since 24 April 2025, connection on 25 April 2025.

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/5177> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/13ta1>

This text was automatically generated on April 25, 2025.



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

Is there a Wittgensteinian Legacy on Habit?

Alice Morelli

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This paper is the product of a research conducted as part of the PRIN 2022 project “Habits in (Time of) Crisis (HiToC). Conceptual Tools for Dealing with Disruptive Events” funded by European Union – NextGenerationEU – The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) – MISSION 4, SECOND INTERVENTION AREA, INVESTIMENTO 1.1 Fondo per il Programma Nazionale di Ricerca e Progetti di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale (PRIN).

1. Introduction

- ¹ This paper examines the relationship between Wittgenstein’s late philosophy and the philosophy of habit. I argue that the answer to the question posed in the title is affirmative: although Wittgenstein does not explicitly develop a theory of habit and custom, his “post-Tractarian” writings can be meaningfully engaged in dialogue with contributions to the philosophy of habit. This engagement allows us to identify a Wittgensteinian legacy in the conceptualization of habit and custom.
- ² Psychologists, philosophers and neuroscientists commonly adopt an operational account of habit (Caruana & Testa 2021), which defines habits as acquired dispositions to engage in well-practiced behaviour when presented with familiar cues associated with that behaviour (Wood & R nger 2016). Conceptually, this account comprises four key elements that specify habit’s origin, mode of acquisition, mode of initiation and operability: (i) its acquired nature, (ii) its formation through repetition and association, (iii) its automatic triggering by relevant stimulus, and (iv) its execution as an automatic, effortless, and mindless action. Within this framework, habits are

understood as dispositions developed through repeated actions in comparable circumstances, leading to an association between contexts and responses. Once formed, these habits are automatically activated by the presence of relevant stimuli, disposing the agent to act in a largely automatic manner. As a result, scholars often emphasize the automatic nature of habitual action, characterizing habits as blind and standardized routines devoid of intelligence, purpose, and intention. This perspective underpins two common dichotomies: habit versus intelligence and habituation versus control.

- 3 However, contemporary philosophy of habit challenges these dichotomies by emphasizing the holistic nature of the concept of habit, which enables a departure from the traditional dualistic perspective. This paradigm shift stems from a reconsideration of habit that, while not new, was partly overshadowed by the dominance of behaviourism and the first generation of cognitive science in the second half of the 20th century. But if we enlarge our perspective, we can see that the philosophical study of habit has a long and rich history which comprises approaches that underscore the centrality of habit not merely as a mechanical routine but as a fundamental structure of human experience and cognition. These approaches range from Aristotle's notion of *hexis* as a stable acquired disposition (Lockwood 2013) to Montaigne's reflections on the force of custom in shaping human belief and conduct (Watkins 2013); and further to Hume's appeal to custom in structuring experience and guiding inductive reasoning (Wright 2011) and Hegel's integration of habit into the dialectical account of spirit as a mediating force between nature and freedom (McCumber 1990). In the 20th century, phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty (2012) emphasized the embodied nature of habitual action, revealing how habits are deeply intertwined with perception and the lived body, and classical pragmatists, such as Dewey (2023) and James (1914), shared the idea that habits "support and orient human sensibility, sustain and nourish cognition, constitute the skeleton of action, and represent the pre-reflective background to implicit and explicit decision-making" (Dreon 2022: 93).
- 4 In this paper, I argue that Wittgenstein's late philosophy provides an additional resource for rethinking habit, aligning with insights from the pragmatist tradition. Specifically, I contend that his conceptualization of habit helps to address and challenge the last three key elements of the operational account, thereby undermining the rigid dichotomies associated with habitual action.
- 5 Wittgenstein employs the notions of habit and custom as early as the 1930s, but I will focus on two specific contexts: (1) his rule-following remarks; (2) his meta-philosophical remarks on the nature of philosophical problems. Accordingly, this paper is divided into two parts. The first section examines the concept of habit as an acquired pattern of behaviour, addressing the dichotomy between habit and intelligence with particular attention to the issue of automaticity. The second section explores the concept of custom as habituation – the process through which habits are acquired, maintained and modified – engaging with the dichotomy between habituation and control.
- 6 In what follows, I first analyze Wittgenstein's use of the notion of custom as *Gepflogenheit* as an example of a rich conceptualization of (at least a kind of) habitual behaviour.¹ In particular, I contrast this notion with two widespread assumptions that contribute to the view of habitual behaviour as unintelligent: the supposed divorce

between habit and rules and the idea that habitual behaviour is purely automatic. Next, I examine Wittgenstein's use of the notion of custom as habituation (*Gewohnheit*) and apply his insights to the problem of habit crisis and change, drawing comparisons with Dewey's account in *Human Nature and Conduct* (Dewey 2023).

2. Rule-following is a Custom

- 7 In Wittgenstein's remarks about rule-following, reference to custom plays a fundamental role in the positive characterization of rule-following as a *practice*. Wittgenstein's primary critical target is a particular account of the normative force of rules – what Fogelin (2009) calls the “interpretational account” and Bridge (2017) terms “the guidance conception” of rules. According to this view, following a rule necessarily involves acting on some *interpretation* that provides secure *guidance* for correct application.
- 8 The main issue with this account is that it leads to a paradox that undermines the normativity of rules: “Whatever I do is, on some interpretation, in accord with the rule” (PI §198).² Consequently, “no course of action could be determined by a rule”, and “if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here” (PI §201). However, Wittgenstein observes that this is a fairly predictable outcome if we uproot the phenomenon of Rule-following from the rich and complex terrain in which it is embedded. Instead, he advocates for a shift in perspective: looking at Rule-following as a *practice* (PI §201-2). This consists, in turn, to characterize it as a *custom* that is intersubjectively shared and embedded in a particular form of life: “to obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs [*Gepflogenheiten*] (uses, institutions)” (PI §199). Wittgenstein employs the German term “*Gepflogenheit*” to refer to this kind of habitual behaviour, which is translated into English as “custom.” Notably, he uses this term *exclusively* within the Rule-following remarks, whereas in other contexts, he employs different German terms to refer to habitual behaviour. This suggests that a *Gepflogenheit* represents a distinct category of habitual behavior. We may define it as a practice governed by rules – a regular usage, a technique that underpins specific ways of acting and functions as a standard or paradigm. These customs are stable, shared practices that operate in the background, constituting a particular form of life and serving as the basis of specific language games. Examples of *Gepflogenheiten* include obeying a rule, making a report, giving an order, playing chess, speaking a language, conducting an experiment, keeping accounts, and following a rule itself (RFM VII §10).
- 9 Two preliminary observations follow from this analysis. First, these customs are collective; they refer to patterned activities shared among members of a particular group and require reciprocal engagement. Second, the examples provided do not include daily routine individual actions such as commuting to work by bus, having coffee for breakfast, or shaving. This suggests that a *Gepflogenheit* is not primarily the result of individual habituation, whether through deliberate effort or repeated action in similar circumstances. Rather, these customs exist prior to the individual, shaping the system into which people are socialized. As Dreon (2022: 95) notes, they are acquired “at a largely prepersonal level, by engaging with the practices, issues, and interlocutors they find in the already broadly habitualized social environment.”³

- 10 For Wittgenstein, the habitual character lies in the fact that “it would be nonsense to say: just once in the history of the world someone followed a rule (or a signpost; played a game, uttered a sentence, or understood one; and so on)” (RFM VI §21).⁴ Indeed, he further distinguishes *Gepflogenheit* from two other types of habitual practice, using the German terms *Gewohnheit* and *Sitte*. “*Gewohnheit*” refers to individual habits as recurring actions such as the habit of saying “so I can stand up” every time one rises from a chair (RPP I §221).⁵ In contrast, “*Sitte*” denotes culturally marked collective habits, that is, traditions and manners of particular communities, such as “the custom [*Sitte*] among a tribe to mark the place that a man is to occupy in an assembly by means of inscribing his coat of arms in the sand” (VW 501). My goal is not to draw a rigid distinction between these types of customs but to highlight conceptual nuances. Wittgenstein’s specific use of the term “*Gepflogenheit*” suggests that a conceptual distinction can be drawn within the category of collective customs, particularly regarding the function that reference to such customs plays in philosophical discourse. I will explore this issue in greater depth in the next section.
- 11 In what follows, I will argue that Wittgenstein’s notion of *Gepflogenheit* serves as a conceptual tool to challenge the dichotomy between habit and intelligence – specifically, the view that “habits are [...] rigid patterns of behaviour that are automatically activated by context cues” (Ramírez-Vizcaya & Froese 2019: 2).⁶ The association of habit with unintelligence stems from its perceived automaticity, rigidity, and alleged insensitivity to reasons (Bermudez & Felletti 2021). However, I will focus here on two aspects: the supposed non-normativity of habit (section 2.1) and the conception of automaticity as an absence of deliberation (2.2).

2.1. Habit and Rules

- 12 One of the key challenges to recognizing intelligence in habit is the purported disconnect between habitual behavior and rule-governed activity. Consider, for instance, Winch’s characterization of “meaningful behaviour” as that which derives significance from the context of rules in which it occurs (Winch 1958). Winch contends that explanations based on rule-following are distinct from and incompatible with causal explanations. Since he situates habit within the causal model, he concludes that rule-following behavior and habitual behavior belong to mutually exclusive categories, arguing that meaningful behavior cannot be causally explained through the concept of habit.
- 13 In contrast, Wittgenstein’s account demonstrates that rule-governed and habitual behaviour are not only compatible but often intertwined. This does not mean that all habits are rule-governed or that all rule-governed actions are habitual. Rather, as Brett (1981: 360) argues, a behaviour “can be rule-governed and habitual at the same time,” meaning that accounts in which actions are explained by reference to rules are not incompatible with accounts in which the same behaviour is seen as the product of habit. Consider the linguistic habit of saying “Good morning”: while most people say it out of habit, “what we are doing on such occasions cannot be explained without reference to the conventions which give sense to this behaviour” (*ibid.*: 370).
- 14 To support this claim, I will outline two essential conceptual features of *Gepflogenheit*: its status as a necessary condition of rule-following and its normative import. A third feature will be introduced in the next section.

- 15 *Necessary condition of Rule-following.* As noted earlier, Wittgenstein characterises Rule-following as a custom, use, or institution (PI §199). However, he also seems to make the stronger claim that *Gepflogenheit* is a necessary condition for Rule-following. In the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, he states that “the application of the concept ‘following a rule’ presupposes a custom” (RFM VI §21), and that the expressions “rule” and “following a rule” “relate to a technique, a custom [*Gepflogenheit*]” (RFM VI §43). In the *Philosophical Investigations*⁷ he similarly notes that “a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom [*Gepflogenheit*]” (PI §198). This suggests not only that the concept of Rule-following presupposes a custom but also that the concrete practice of following rules presupposes the existence of established customs.
- 16 This idea becomes clearer when we compare these remarks to Wittgenstein’s treatment of the grammar of terms referring to intentional mental states, such as intending. In the *Investigations*, an imaginary interlocutor challenges Wittgenstein by suggesting that intention does not require a pre-existing custom: “it is just the queer thing about *intention*, about the mental process, that the existence of a custom [*Gepflogenheit*], of a technique, is not necessary to it” (PI §205). The interlocutor imagines a world where individuals can play chess, begin games, and even be interrupted – all without any established tradition of games. Wittgenstein counters this by emphasizing that chess is defined by its rules: “An intention is embedded in its situation, in human customs [*menschlichen Gepflogenheiten*] and institutions. If the technique of the game of chess did not exist, I could not intend to play a game of chess” (*ibid.*). Similarly, while one might intuitively assume that they form a complete sentence in their mind before speaking, thereby treating intending as a mental state or act that *precedes* action and gives instructions, this process presupposes linguistic competence – the ability to speak the language. Wittgenstein does not argue that custom causes intention – it is not a matter of genealogy of the mental state. Rather, he draws a logical boundary: an intention presupposes an established practice, a shared and stabilized behavioral pattern, not the other way round. The same logic applies to rule-governed behaviour in general: Rule-following requires an established practice to be such. This also helps resolve concerns about circularity in Wittgenstein’s account, where he appears both to identify rule-following with custom and to argue that custom is a necessary condition for rule-following.⁸ On one hand, the remark that rule-following is a custom is a methodological precept, a way of looking at the phenomenon to dispel philosophical confusions. On the other hand, the priority of custom over rule-following is not an empirical or genealogical claim but a matter of logical grounding.
- 17 *Normative import.* As *Gepflogenheit* is structurally linked to rules, it carries normative significance by serving as a paradigm for action. This normative import is precisely what makes *Gepflogenheit* a necessary condition for rule-following: the habitual practice provides a paradigm for action and a standard for evaluating correctness. Applying a rule to a new case thus establishes a standard of correctness for future applications under similar conditions, forming a stable, familiar behavioral pattern that embodies human agreement in action, or in particular *Gepflogenheiten*. To say that custom has normative import does not mean that custom is the source of normativity. Rather, it acquires the force of a law thanks to its being in a certain sense regulative. Dewey expresses a similar idea when he argues that collective customs “supply the standards

for personal activities. They are patterns into which individual activity must weave itself” (Dewey 2023: 45).

- 18 From the perspective of the philosophy of habit, the normativity of *Gepflogenheit* implies at least two things. First, this is what differentiates *Gepflogenheiten* from individual habits (*Gewohnheit*) and culturally specific customs (*Sitte*): individual routine habits lack the normative force of habit as rule-governed practice. For instance, while one may habitually take a shower at the same time every night, it would be strange to claim that it is wrong to shower at a different time. Similarly, there is a subtle distinction between traditions or manners and shared practices that function as stable “underlying” paradigms at the foundation of action and thought, although traditions can acquire the normative force of *Gepflogenheit*.⁹ Wittgenstein suggests this idea when he writes on convention. Whereas a convention is explicitly stipulated, a *Gepflogenheit* is not the product of a table-top contract. However, a convention can become a custom and, when this happens, it becomes so entrenched that its conventional nature gets forgotten and produces distress when modified.
- 19 Second, while *Gepflogenheit* is acquired, its acquisition is structured by rule-governed training rather than mere associative reinforcement (Smeyers 2017). Wittgenstein’s remarks on training remain a subject of debate, and a full discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is clear that the acquisition of *Gepflogenheiten* entails a specific mode of habituation: agents acquire these collective customs – often implicitly – through engagement with their community. Scholars such as Medina (2002) and Stickney (2017) describe this process as a kind of *normative training*, whereby individuals adopt regular patterns and customs of usage through their interactions with parents, peers, mentors, and community members. Agents acquire the normative attitudes of the “mentors” and a regularity is created that leads to a consensus of action. In this way, custom, as a law or paradigm, fosters a tendency to act in a way that involves *regularity*.

2.2. Habit and Automaticity

- 20 The third feature of a *Gepflogenheit* is regularity (RFM VI §21). Remarks on regularity help counter the notion that habitual behavior is stereotyped and devoid of intelligence *because* it is automatic. The concept of automaticity has been used to explain the fact that an habitual act is directly triggered by a stimulus in relevant circumstances (Pollard 2006), and to account for habit’s motivational force – the fact that habit moves the agent in an immediate way and unfolds with little or no effort or conscious attention. However, automaticity is a cluster concept encompassing at least four different aspects: the absence of deliberation and intention, the reduction of attention and effort, the reduction or absence of conscious awareness, and the enhancement of speed, accuracy, and efficacy of action. In light of this, I concur with Douskos (2018) that the predominant meaning in contemporary debates on habitual action is the first. I will discuss this specific aspect of automaticity concerning the issue of habit’s motivational force.
- 21 It is undeniable that much of what we do habitually occurs without practical deliberation. However, the traditional automaticity model upholds a stronger, twofold thesis: (i) the absence of deliberation is a necessary condition for automaticity, and (ii) automaticity, so understood, is a necessary condition for habitual acts – hence, all

habitual actions are automatic (i.e., non-deliberate). This model is part of the operational account of habit and rests on two assumptions: first, a concept of deliberation as “a conscious mental activity, in which the agent aims to resolve a question” (*ibid.*: 31). Deliberation, in this view, is conscious insofar as it involves attention and awareness, and it is an activity the agent intentionally engages in. Second, the idea that automaticity so defined implies a lack of intelligence (Miyahara & Robertson 2021). Against these assumptions, philosophers and psychologists have worked to show that automaticity varies in degrees and properties, meaning habitual behavior is not merely a repetition of past events but allows for flexibility within familiar activities (Bermudez & Felletti 2021).

- 22 In this regard, I argue that Wittgenstein’s remarks on regularity provide conceptual tools to challenge the traditional automaticity model by offering an alternative explanatory framework for how acquired customs incline an agent to act in a certain way without necessarily precluding deliberation. Against (i), I characterize automaticity using Wittgenstein’s notion of “comfortable sureness”; against (ii), I employ Wittgenstein’s concept of the “feeling of familiarity” to describe the automatic unfolding of habitual actions in terms of immediacy as non-mediation.
- 23 First, regularity should not be conflated with repetition. Instead of reducing habit and its mode of acquisition to mere repetition of past actions, regularity is viewed as a necessary condition for a particular behavioral pattern to become an *established* practice. “Regular” contrasts with “sporadic” and “occasional,” and aligns with Hare’s notion of “consistency of practice,” understood as an acquired tendency to act in a way that involves a background of valued regularity (Hare 1963). Second, regularity is intrinsically linked to the acquisition of a *feeling of familiarity*, which explains the tendency, that is, how custom disposes the agent to act. According to Wittgenstein, regular practice is necessary but not sufficient to constitute a praxis; what is additionally required is a feeling of “being at home” with the practice (PG VIII §116). This feeling is tied to things we are familiar with but is not reducible to an agent’s familiarity with a course of action acquired through past engagement. Indeed, Wittgenstein states that “what constitutes the familiarity is not the historical fact that I’ve often seen objects like that etc.” (PPF 78-9) – it is not a mere product of cumulative repetition. Rather, “the familiarity lies in the fact that I immediately grasp a particular rhythm of the picture and stay with it, fell at home with it” (*ibid.*). While this is not incompatible with acquiring familiarity through practice, it draws a conceptual distinction between being familiar with something and feeling familiarity immediately, perceiving it as *natural*.¹⁰ By setting aside historical considerations, Wittgenstein focuses on “impressions (experiences, reactions),” such as the fact that “my glance doesn’t move restlessly (inquiringly) around the object. I don’t keep changing the way I look at it, but immediately fix on one and hold it steady” (PG VIII §116). These remarks concern perception and recognition, but a similar argument applies to habitual action. This description aligns with typical habitual behavior: the agent does not pause to reflect before acting but responds immediately without explicitly considering the steps involved. Recently, Hornett (2023) has proposed an alternative approach to the traditional automaticity view, relying on the feeling of familiarity towards what we are familiar with. He integrates automaticity and deliberation in habitual action through the affective nature of the feeling of familiarity, arguing that it can motivate action without deliberation because affective states immediately incline the agent. His central idea is that being familiar with a course of action provides a reason to follow it, as it

constitutes knowledge of well-trodden route within a given context. However, the concept of familiarity I discuss is not merely about preferring the familiar over the unknown; rather, the feeling of familiarity signals the naturalness of behavior derived from normative training into shared practices. This, in turn, accounts for why familiar actions occur without *explicit* deliberation.

- 24 Actually, Wittgenstein captures the tension typical of habitual behaviour when he observes that “we may feel it’s plainly wrong to say that in such a case all that happens may be that I hear or say the word. For that seems to be saying that part of the time we act as mere automatons. And the answer is that in a sense we do and in a sense we don’t” (BB 157). This tension echoes what Miyahara and Robertson (2021: 597) call “the intelligence puzzle of habits”: the fact that “habitual actions unfold without conscious deliberation or reflection, and yet seem to be intelligently adjusted to situational intricacies.” Wittgenstein’s remark suggests that we can acknowledge the undeniable automaticity of habitual behavior without dismissing its intelligence and purposiveness.
- 25 Against the claim that the absence of deliberation is a necessary condition for automaticity of behaviour, Wittgenstein frequently highlights some human behaviours that are expressions of a “comfortable sureness” (OC §357) – actions performed without needing to *explicitly* think about them. This does not mean that they are done without thinking *tout court*;¹¹ rather, these actions are not inferred by induction, do not require occurrent thinking or reflection, and are performed “before any doubt.” Furthermore, it does not exclude the possibility of deliberation. For instance, making an experiment is a *Gepflogenheit*, yet it would be misguided to claim that scientists do not deliberate at all. What is absent in habitual behaviour is *explicit* deliberation in the unfolding of action – if by “explicit deliberation” we mean a sequence of mental acts of ponderation, inference, and reflection on what to do.
- 26 Additionally, the automatic unfolding of habitual acts is accounted with a “peculiar call to immediacy” (Perissinotto 2018) stemming from the incorporation of a given custom. Wittgenstein’s examples of *Gepflogenheiten* exemplify behaviours that are rule-governed, done out of habit, and natural. This sense of naturalness is acquired, yet so deeply entrenched that it becomes a form of nature, sharing something with pre-linguistic behaviour: the immediacy of action as *non-intellectual mediation*. This perspective accounts for the fact that when we act out of habit, we act immediately, without mental intermediaries. This spontaneity of action is ensured by the incorporation of the practice and, consequently, the incorporation of custom. Wittgenstein summarizes this idea in his famous remark: when I follow a rule – and following a rule is related to a custom – I act *blindly* (PI §219). However, acting blindly does not mean acting without reason (purposeless), unintelligently, or unintentionally. Rather, it means acting without choosing, much as we do not choose when we obey an order because we are trained to obey an order and we react in a determinate way as a consequence of this (normative) training (PI §206). Importantly, this does not imply an incapacity to choose due to a lack of free will or external causation – it is not a matter of causal conditioning. While one can choose not to obey an order or follow a rule, when intending to act according to rules and orders, one is bound by logical constraints rather than external causal forces (PI §198). The reference model for this alternative perspective on the absence of deliberation in habitual action is James’ notion of the “absence of will act” (BB 193). The key point is that a singular intentional act is not a

necessary condition for an action to be voluntary and intentional. Thus, an action can still be voluntary even when it occurs immediately – that is, without explicit deliberation or a distinct volitional act (Morelli 2023). This does not imply that habitual actions cannot involve deliberation; rather, the absence of deliberation is not due to an external trigger but arises from the internal relation between action, rules, and the incorporation of customs.

3. The Power of Custom

- 27 So far I have explored a Wittgensteinian conceptualization of habit as an acquired and shared pattern of behaviour. However, Wittgenstein also employs the term “*Gewohnheit*” to refer to the process of habituation, which is translated into English as “force of habit” (RPP II §221, VW 75) and “the power of custom” (RPP I §343). Custom, understood as habituation, plays three crucial roles:
- 28 1. It underlies both action and thought. Wittgenstein frequently emphasizes the fact that we become accustomed to certain ways of *thinking* and *looking* at phenomena, and that we behave in a certain way by virtue of these ingrained *habits of thought*.¹²
 - 29 2. It establishes paradigms. Part of Wittgenstein’s anthropological turn consists not only in drawing attention to the normative and paradigmatic role of certain habitual practices, but also in the fact that “Thanks to custom, particular forms become paradigms; they acquire the force of a law (the ‘power of habit?’)” (RPP I §343).
 - 30 3. It shapes (aesthetic) sensibility. Consider the phenomenon of aspect-seeing. If we take, for instance, the various aspects of the image of a triangle, the triangle “can be seen as a triangular hole, as a solid, as a geometrical drawing [...] and as various other things” (PPF 200), but the image itself does not change. Similarly, certain painting styles may resonate deeply with some viewers while leaving others unaffected, though the style itself does not change. In such cases, there is no “how the image must be” to produce a certain effect, and there is a shift in the way the image is seen rather than in the image itself. Regarding this perspectival change, Wittgenstein notes that “custom and upbringing have a hand in this” (PPF 201). Aspect-seeing presupposes mastery of a certain technique: “Now he’s seeing it like *this*,’ ‘now like *that*’ would only be said of someone *capable* of making certain applications of the figure” (PPF 208). This means that it presupposes the existence of a certain custom, which itself is established thanks to the power of custom and shapes the way in which people look at things. This perspective extends beyond the idea that habit constrains action by shaping perception – such as in Dreyfus’ notion of “absorbed coping,” where the agent seeks to realize a “satisfactory gestalt” (Dreyfus 2002: 379). On the one hand, Wittgenstein’s remarks are not limited to perception *tout-court* but also address how custom shapes the way we look at phenomena, explain them, philosophize about them and engage with the world more broadly.¹³ On the other hand, with respect to situational perception, his account aligns more closely with Dewey’s characterization of the perceptual function of habits. Unlike Dreyfus, Dewey does not argue that habits determine or motivate a single course of action aimed at achieving a predefined satisfactory gestalt. Instead, habits constrain the range of available possibilities, thereby shaping subsequent thought and action – but without necessarily narrowing the agent’s options. On the contrary, certain habits may expand an agent’s perceptual field, allowing them to discern a broader range of possibilities than they otherwise would (Dewey 2023).

3.1. The Dark Side of Custom

- 31 There are cases in which custom both constrains and limits, though. While custom underpins action and thought, it can also give rise to deceptive images and misunderstandings, making it necessary, at times, to “break its spell” (BB 23). For Wittgenstein, the primary issue here is that “when we get accustomed to that sort of description,” we become “incapable of seeing it the other way” (WWCL 162). There are two types of dysfunctional thinking habits:
- 32 1. The “blind” application of a remedy in a non-functional context. This occurs when a habitual procedure is applied indiscriminately, even in situations where it is ineffective – cases in which some mental habits are pushed to the excess or they overshoot the mark, so to speak. A prime example is philosophical reductionism: “by the force of habit, we are accustomed to calming our mental anxieties by reducing certain propositions to others that are more fundamental,” and we tend to adopt this remedy even when it is practically useless, such as when our anxiety stems from a lack of clarity regarding the grammatical connections in certain linguistic domains (VW 75).
- 33 2. Misleading analogies embedded in language that implicitly shape thought. Wittgenstein offers three significant examples. First, the mentalistic idea that outward expressions are signs of internal mental processes – as if every outward expression must be tied to an internal mental process to be meaningful – is reinforced by the linguistic habit of “speaking of the colour of the face as a sign of fever” (RPP I §292). Second, “we are used to thinking of thought as something ethereal and unexplored, as if we were talking about something whose exterior alone is known to us, and whose interior remains unknown, like our brain” (PG I 66), but this habit is the “crystallization” of a grammatical misunderstanding – the belief that a noun must correspond to a substance. Third, the referentialist theory of meaning arises from the fact that “we are accustomed – in an enormous number of cases – to words which can be explained straight away by pointing to certain objects [...] so we think, again and again, this: that a word in a language stands for something, and if we know what it stands for, then all the rest follows” (WWCL 234).¹⁴

3.2. Breaking the Spell of Custom

- 34 Given the potential dysfunctional outcomes of custom, Wittgenstein does not conclude that we must eliminate custom and habit altogether. On the contrary, his remarks suggest that the remedy for dysfunctional mental habits lies within the power of custom itself. This is why I argue that a Wittgensteinian-inspired perspective on custom as habituation provides a conceptual framework for understanding habit crisis and change without endorsing the traditional dichotomy between habitual behaviour and control.
- 35 This dichotomy is prevalent in social psychology literature and is reinforced by dual-process theories of cognition, which posit that automatic and controlled processes are mutually exclusive. According to this view, any given response is typically characterized as *either* the result of automatic *or* controlled processes (Devine & Sharp 2009).¹⁵ For instance, Devine (1989) compares biased automatic responses to bad habits that can be broken but frames habit change entirely within the domain of controlled

processes – intentional inhibition, cognitive effort, and the substitution of mental habits with proper beliefs. In this model, reducing biased habits requires motivation to respond without bias, awareness of the bias, and cognitive resources such as attention, working memory, and effort.

- 36 In contrast to this framework, Wittgenstein’s remarks suggest that the spell of custom is broken not through sheer cognitive control but through the transformative power of custom itself. In *The Brown Book*, he writes that we should “try to build new notations to break the spell of those we are accustomed to” in order to see “how far the analogy between uses go” (BB 23). On one level, this points to the comparative strategy in which the philosopher illuminates linguistic usage by juxtaposing different language games, including imaginative ones.¹⁶ On another level, Wittgenstein gestures toward the idea that a dysfunctional habit of thought can be replaced by another, non-dysfunctional one – where this replacement itself occurs through habituation. Custom thus plays a dual role: as habituation, it is the mechanism through which a new mental habit is formed; as an acquired pattern, it constitutes the new habit itself. The key insight is that we cannot entirely escape the grip of custom, as it underlies both thought and action. The process of overcoming misleading habits of thought is neither simple nor immediate. It involves working through misleading analogies via *grammatical analysis* – an approach that, in a Wittgensteinian framework, extends beyond mere syntactic analysis or explicit definitions. Rather, it is a process of clarifying use, where “use” is not limited to the factual application of an expression but encompasses the intricate internal connections that form the “vital” web in which it is embedded. This web includes holistically not only environmental and species-specific features of agents but also their interests, desires, and needs, as well as the institutions, organizations, and social structures that shape their practices – customs in the sense of *Gepflogenheiten*.

3.3. Wittgenstein and Dewey: Habit Crisis and Change

- 37 Wittgenstein does not develop an explicit theory of habit crisis and habit change, but his perspective can be fruitfully integrated with Dewey’s distinction between routine and intelligent habits (Dewey 2023: 41-2). Both Dewey and Wittgenstein share two key ideas: first, that custom “cures” custom, and second, that the problem of dysfunctional habits is fundamentally one of an impoverished sensibility. Though they approach these ideas in different but compatible ways, their perspectives offer valuable tools for understanding habit change from distinct standpoints.
- 38 In Wittgenstein’s case, a dysfunctional mental habit is one that leads to *perspectival immobility* – a rigid way of seeing and thinking that constrains perception by limiting sensitivity to differences, restricting alternative perspectives, and narrowing the range of possible interpretations of a given situation. His proposed solution, as we have seen, involves *replacing* a dysfunctional mental habit with a more functional one through the grammatical analysis of misleading analogies that have become sedimented by custom itself.
- 39 In Dewey’s case, “*adaptation*” is the key word. While he acknowledges that “all habit involves mechanization [...], a mechanism of action [...] which operates ‘spontaneously,’ automatically, whenever the cue is given,” he insists that “mechanization is not of necessity all there is to habit” (*ibid.*: 40-1). Both routine and intelligent habits are abilities acquired through past experience and principles of action, shaping our desires,

beliefs and interests (*ibid.*: 36). However, while routine habits are dictated entirely by the mechanism, intelligent habits integrate mechanism “with thought and feeling” (*ibid.*: 41). This integration allows them to remain open and responsive to new situations and environmental changes, making them more adaptable under shifting conditions. Dysfunctional routine habits, therefore, are those that lack *adaptability* – that is, they are insensitive to changing circumstances to the point of becoming obsolete: “what makes a habit bad is enslavement to old ruts” (*ibid.*: 38). Dewey’s proposed solution is multifaceted. On one level, he advocates for cultivating a “reflective-meditative habit” (*ibid.*: 146) of “constant watchfulness” and attentiveness – an acute sensitivity to the external conditions incorporated in habits (*ibid.*: 85). On another level, he suggests that this habit of vigilance enables the transformation of pre-existing habits through the intelligent use of impulses and a deliberative process involving observation, memory, and imaginative anticipation. While impulses precede habits chronologically – as they are native organs of reorganization and readjustment (*ibid.*: 56) – they follow habits in conduct, since they can be educated and directed by habits. When a crisis occurs, new impulsive energy is released, creating an opportunity to modify habits by channeling impulses in specific ways. Ultimately, Dewey argues for the development of a habit of ongoing vigilance – one that enhances sensitivity to shifts in objective conditions and facilitates adaptation through a continual process of habit readjustment. Resistance to change, in this view, is nothing more than the inertia of deeply entrenched habits.

- 40 Although Wittgenstein’s concept of perspectival immobility does not entirely align with Dewey’s notion of adaptability, both perspectives converge on the idea that the rigidity of habits stems from a diminished sensibility – whether in the form of an attachment to fixed ways of seeing and thinking (Wittgenstein) or in the inability to respond effectively to environmental changes (Dewey). Taken together, these views provide complementary insights into habit crises and transformations: the modification, redirection, and adaptation of pre-existing habits through custom itself, alongside the substitution of dysfunctional habits with functional ones via counter-habituation.

4. Conclusion

- 41 Bermudez and Felletti (2021: 594) argue that habitual action is an “amphibious” phenomenon that “straddles many traditional dichotomies” including those between (i) internal and external, (ii) intelligent and mindless, and (iii) automatic and controlled. I have demonstrated that that these dichotomies arise from an operational account of habit and argued that a Wittgensteinian-inspired conceptualization of habit and custom, in alignment with certain classical pragmatist themes, provides a means of overcoming them. Specifically, Wittgenstein’s characterization of habit as a principle of action challenges (i), as it undermines any substantive distinction between inner mental states and outer behaviour. His notion of *Gepflogenheit* counters (ii) by illustrating that rule-governed habitual behavior is not merely mechanical but can also be intelligent. Finally, in contrast to (iii), Wittgenstein highlights that habits and customs are acquired through habituation itself, without resorting to a dualistic framework that rigidly divides human behavior into either entirely controlled or

entirely automatic processes. Custom, as the foundation of both action and thought, also serves as the means by which its own potential dysfunctionalities can be overcome.

- 42 Wittgenstein's late remarks challenge three core assumptions of the operational account. First, against the idea that habit is acquired solely through cumulative repetition and associative mechanisms, Wittgenstein's *Gepflogenheit* is best understood as a shared custom learned through normative training. Habitual practice, in this view, requires regularity rather than mere repetition. Second, against the claim that habits are automatically triggered by relevant stimuli, Wittgenstein maintains that *Gepflogenheit* is a form of deliberate and intentional custom that necessitates at least a minimal degree of situational recognition. Third, against the assumption that habitual actions unfold as entirely automatic, effortless, and mindless processes, Wittgenstein's reflections on rule-following suggest two key insights: (i) the absence of deliberation is not a necessary condition for automaticity – habitual behaviour is automatic because it is not inferred by induction and does not need occurrent thinking and pondering; (ii) automaticity understood as absence of deliberation is not necessary condition for habitual behaviour. The immediacy of habit does not entail a lack of intentionality or purposiveness; rather, it is the immediacy of action acquired through the ingraining of familiarity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ANDRONICO Marilena, (1998), *Antropologia e metodo morfologico. Studio su Wittgenstein*, Napoli, La città del sole.

BAKER Gordon P. (ed.), (2003), *The Voices of Wittgenstein: The Vienna Circle, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Friedrich Waismann*, London, Routledge. [VW].

BERMUDEZ Juan P. & Flavia FELLETTI, (2021), "Introduction: Habitual Action, Automaticity, and Control," *TOPOI*, 40, 587-95.

BRETT Nathan, (1981), "Human Habits," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 11(3), 357-76.

BRIDGE Jason, (2017), "Meaning and Understanding," in Hans J. Glock & John Hyman (eds), *A Companion to Wittgenstein*, Oxford, Wiley Blackwell.

CARUANA Fausto & Italo TESTA (eds), (2021), *Habits: Pragmatist Approaches from Cognitive Science, Neuroscience, and Social Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

DEVINE Patricia G., (1989), "Stereotypes and Prejudice: Their Automatic and Controlled Components," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56(1), 5-18.

DEVINE Patricia G. & Margo J. MONTEITH, (1999), "Automaticity and Control in Stereotyping," in Shelly Chaiken & Yaacov Trope (eds), *Dual Process Theories in Social Psychology*, New York, Guildford Press, 339-60.

- DEVINE Patricia G. & Lindsay B. SHARP, (2009), "Automaticity and Control in Stereotyping and Prejudice," in Nelson Todd. (ed), *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination*, New York, Psychology Press, 61-87.
- DEWEY John, (2023), *Human Nature and Conduct*, Zinc Read.
- DOUSKOS Christos, (2018), "Deliberation and Automaticity in Habitual Acts," *Ethics in Progress*, 9(1), 25-43.
- DREON Roberta, (2022), *Human Landscapes. Contributions to a Pragmatist Anthropology*, Albany, State University of New York Press.
- DREYFUS Hubert L., (2002), "Intelligence without Representation – Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Mental Representation: The Relevance of Phenomenology to Scientific Explanation," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 1, 367-83.
- FOGELIN Richard J., (2009), *Taking Wittgenstein at his Word: A Textual Study*, Oxford, Princeton University Press.
- GASPARATU Renia, (2017), "On 'The Temptation to Attack Common Sense'," in Michael A. Peters & Jeff Stickney (eds), *A Companion to Wittgenstein on Education*, London, Springer.
- GRAYBIEL Ann M., (2008), "Habits, Rituals, and the Evaluative Brain," *Annual Review of Neuroscience*, 31, 359-87.
- HARE Richard M., (1963), *Freedom and Reason*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- HORNETT William, (2023), "The Force of Habit," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 104(3), 529-58.
- HUTCHINSON Adam & Tom SPARROW (eds), (2013), *A History of Habit: From Aristotle to Bourdieu*, Plymouth, Lexington Books.
- JAMES William, (1914), *Habit*, New York, Henry Holt & Co.
- LOCKWOOD Thornton C., (2013), "Habituation, Habit and Character in Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics," in Adam Hutchinson & Tom Sparrow (eds), *A History of Habit: From Aristotle to Bourdieu*, Plymouth, Lexington Books, 19-36.
- MCCUMBER John, (1990), "Hegel on Habit," *The Owl of Minerva*, 21(2), 155-65.
- MEDINA José, (2002), *The Unity of Wittgenstein's Philosophy*, Albany, State University of New York Press.
- MERLEAU-PONTY Maurice, (2012), *Phenomenology of Perception*, New York, Routledge.
- MIYAHARA Katsunori & Ian ROBERTSON, (2021), "The Pragmatic Intelligence of Habits," *TOPOI*, 40, 597-608.
- MORELLI Alice, (2023), "'Ad occhi chiusi.' Riflessioni sull'immediatezza dell'azione a partire dagli studi di Luigi Perissinotto," in Roberta Dreon, Matteo Favaretti Camposampiero, Gian Luigi Paltrinieri & Elena Valeri (eds), *Senza Trampoli. Saggi filosofici per Luigi Perissinotto*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 225-39.
- MORELLI Alice, (2024), "Wittgenstein on Habit and Custom," *Argumenta* ("Early View"), 1-18.
- PERISSINOTTO Luigi, (2018), "Immediacy as a Philosophical Method: Wittgenstein, the Problem of Life and the Disappearance of the 'Problematic'," *Pragmatism Today*, 9(2), 74-84.
- PERISSINOTTO Luigi, (2022), "A Comfortable Sureness: Knowledge, Animality and Conceptual Investigations in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*," *TOPOI*, 41, 1013-21.

- POLLARD Bill, (2006), "Explaining Actions with Habits," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 43(1), 57-69.
- PRESTON John, (2022), "The Idea of a Pseudo-Problem in Mach, Hertz, and Boltzmann," *Journal for General Philosophy of Science*, 54, 55-77.
- RAMÍREZ-VIZCAYA Susana & Tom FROESE, (2019), "The Enactive Approach to Habits: New Concepts for the Cognitive Science of Bad Habits and Addiction," *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10. Online: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00301>.
- SMEYERS Paul, (2017), "'This Is Simply What I do.' On the Relevance of Wittgenstein's Alleged Conservatism and the Debate About Cavell's Legacy for Children and Grown-Ups," in Michael A. Peters & Jeff Stickney (eds), *A Companion to Wittgenstein on Education*, London, Springer.
- STICKNEY Jeff, (2017), "Wittgenstein as Educator," in Michael A. Peters & Jeff Stickney (eds), *A Companion to Wittgenstein on Education*, London, Springer.
- VERPLANKEN Bas & Henk AARTS, (1999), "Habit, Attitude, and Planned Behaviour: Is Habit an Empty Construct or an Interesting Case of Goal-Directed Automaticity?," *European Review of Social Psychology*, 10, 101-34.
- WATKINS Margaret, (2013), "Negotiating with a New Sovereign: Montaigne's Transformation of Habit into Custom," in Adam Hutchinson & Tom Sparrow (eds), *A History of Habit: From Aristotle to Bourdieu*, Plymouth, Lexington Books, 89-118.
- WINCH Peter, (1958), *The Idea of a Social Science*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- WITTGENSTEIN Ludwig, (1969a), *The Blue and the Brown Books*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell. [BB].
- WITTGENSTEIN Ludwig, (1969b), *On Certainty*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell. [OC].
- WITTGENSTEIN Ludwig, (1974), *Philosophical Grammar*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell. [PG].
- WITTGENSTEIN Ludwig, (1978), *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell. [RFM].
- WITTGENSTEIN Ludwig, (1980), *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. I and II, Oxford, Blackwell. [RPP I-II].
- WITTGENSTEIN Ludwig, (1982), *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. I, Oxford, Blackwell. [LW I].
- WITTGENSTEIN Ludwig, (2009), *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell. [PI].
- WITTGENSTEIN Ludwig, (2009), *Philosophy of Psychology - A Fragment*, in PI, 183-243. [PPF].
- WITTGENSTEIN Ludwig, (2017), *Wittgenstein's Whewell's Court Lectures, Cambridge, 1938-1941, from the Notes by Yorick Smythies*, ed. by Volker Munz & Bernhard Ritter, Oxford, Wiley Blackwell. [WWCL].
- WOOD Wendy, LABRECQUE Jennifer S., LIN Pei-Ying & Dennis RÜNGER, (2014), "Habits in Dual-Process Models," in Jeffrey W. Sherman, Bertram G. Gawronski & Yaacov Trope (eds), *Dual-Process Theories of the Social Mind*, New York, The Guildford Press.
- WOOD Wendy & Dennis RÜNGER (2016), "Psychology of Habit," *Annual Review of Psychology*, 67, 289-314.
- WRIGHT John P., (2011), "Ideas of Habit and Custom in Early Modern Philosophy," *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology*, 42(1), 18-32.

NOTES

1. For a detailed grammatical analysis of Wittgenstein's use of the notions of habit and custom, I would refer to Morelli 2024.
 2. Wittgenstein's sources are cited by the abbreviation followed by the paragraph number or the page number. See the bibliography.
 3. There is a cumulative dimension of custom. As stated by Dewey (2023: 33), "the activities of the group are already there, and some assimilation of his own acts to their pattern is a prerequisite of [...] having any part in what is going on."
 4. See also RFM VII §10.
 5. See also BB 34, WWCL 108, and LW I 126.
 6. See also Verplanken & Aarts 1999, Wood *et al.* 2014, and Graybiel 2008, for the adoption of the dichotomy in psychology and cognitive science.
 7. Henceforth "Investigations."
 8. I thank Guido Tana for this point.
 9. I thank Benjamin De Mesel and Sorin Bangu for this point.
 10. The distinction between "*being* familiar with something" and "*feeling* or *seeming* familiar with something" is found in Hornett (2023: 15).
 11. This distinction is found in Perissinotto 2022. Similarly, according to Gasparatu 2017, "without thought" does not mean unintentional.
 12. The notion of habit of thought, or thinking mental habit, is probably taken from Ludwig Boltzmann. See Preston 2022.
 13. This is something that goes in the direction of Dreon's idea that "human sensibility is structurally embedded in a natural environment as well as in an already sociocultural niche to which the organism is constantly exposed" (Dreon 2022: 35).
 14. Another example is assimilationism, discussed by Sorin Bangu at the 1st Conference of the Young Network for Wittgensteinian Philosophy. Assimilationism is the mental habit to prefer uniformity over variety.
 15. For a review and critique of the dual-process model see Devine & Monteith 1999.
 16. For a detailed study on Wittgenstein's morphological-comparative method see Andronico 1998.
-

ABSTRACTS

The paper focuses on the connection between Wittgenstein's "post-Tractarian" philosophy and contemporary debates on the nature of habitual behaviour and its alleged automaticity by looking at the problem of the normativity of habits and the role of custom in changing and preventing dysfunctional habits. I argue that Wittgenstein's philosophy can be an additional useful tool to engage in a re-consideration of habit as it has been advanced by the pragmatist tradition against an operational account. In particular, I argue that Wittgenstein's conceptualization of habit and custom can be used to address the dichotomy between habit and intelligence, and the dichotomy between habituation and control. Firstly, I present Wittgenstein's use of the notion of custom as *Gepflogenheit* to undermine the former dichotomy. Secondly, I present Wittgenstein's use of the notion of custom as habituation (*Gewohnheit*) and its relation to sensibility to undermine the latter dichotomy. Finally, I apply Wittgenstein's insights

to the issue of habit crisis and change through a comparison with Dewey's account in his *Human Nature and Conduct*.

INDEX

Keywords: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Habit, John Dewey, Automaticity, Sensibility

AUTHOR

ALICE MORELLI

Ca' Foscari University Venice
alice.morelli[at]unive.it