

# Virtue's Embodied Malleability the Plasticity of Habit and the Double-Law of Habituation

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**Virtue's Embodied Malleability: The Plasticity of Habit and the Double-Law of  
Habituation**

**For Submission to *Philosophy of Management***

## **Virtue's Embodied Malleability: The Plasticity of Habit and the Double-Law of Habituation**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper urges contemporary Business Ethicists to reconsider the relationship between habit and virtue in the light of recent debates between contemporary philosophers and scientists. Synthesizing insights from current Neuroscience, from 20<sup>th</sup> century American Pragmatism and from 19<sup>th</sup> century French Aristotelianism, this emergent intellectual tradition proposes a dynamic account of habit's embodiment which we will first describe and then advocate. Two recurring suggestions within this habit renaissance are of particular relevance to Business Ethicists: firstly, that there is a 'plastic' structure pertaining to habit and, secondly, that there is a processual 'double-law of habituation'. Taken together, these nuanced accounts of habit and habituation provide virtue ethicists with a basis for claiming analytic and pragmatic authority within applied ethics debates in general and within Business Ethics debates in particular. We develop this argument in three steps. Firstly, we elaborate upon why habits are said to be plastic and why the process of habituation is said to be characterised by a double-law. Secondly, we distinguish this account of habit's relationship to virtue from, and where necessary defend it against, the influential articulations of the habit: virtue relationship provided by situationism, by deontology and by communitarianism, respectively. Finally, we draw practical lessons from the initial elaborations made in the argument's first step, and the subsequent clarifications provided in its second step, by announcing seven characteristics of highly effective virtue habituation projects.

### **Keywords**

Communitarianism; Deontology; Habit, Pragmatism; Situationism; Virtue Ethics

## **INTRODUCTION**

The nature of habit's relationship to virtue has long provided an intriguing puzzle to Business Ethicists (Ferrero and Sison 2014, Betta 2018). For not only are our habits a series of dispositions which allow each of us to cope with the otherwise inordinate complexity of life, they also play an indispensable role in how we distinguish between the right and the wrong. Any coordinated effort to cultivate habits which brackets out the mundane fact that habits are constantly being formed within and beyond formal organisations must fall on the sword of its own hubris. This isn't to say that all coordinated efforts to cultivate habits are doomed in advance: far from it. It is only to recognise the truism which many theorists have already established and many practitioners have already experienced: the relationship between future aspirations and existing habits is neither causal nor linear. And so the success of any organisational change management programme, ethical or otherwise, will be at least as much a product of what individuals do automatically as by what they do after conscious deliberation. In this paper we argue that Business Ethicists concerned with intervening at the level of habit have much to gain from recent interdisciplinary discoveries into the nature of habit.

Our lives are a tightly woven fabric of habits which provide us with stability and direction. Our habits both get us up and get up with us in the morning: pouring our coffees, taking us to our offices, scheduling our meetings, answering our emails, negotiating our interactions, ordering our lunches, determining where we eat it, propelling us through the rest of the day and then bringing us back home again. Our habits don't even get to clock off when we do. They also accompany us throughout the beers we drink, the sports we play, the culture which entertains us and the bedtime stories with which we lull our kids – and often ourselves - to sleep. For it is our habits, as Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, which shield us from an otherwise unbearable life of

incessant improvisation (2006, 129). It is our habits, that is, which ensure that a metaphysical distinction exists between us and the essentially impressionable will o' the wisp.

Although prevalent throughout all of our lifetimes, our habits do not ultimately determine what each of us amount to. That's because we all have the capacity to reflect upon where our habits have gotten us and to speculate as to where others might bring us instead. We all devise mechanisms to weed bad habits out of existence, for the sake of nourishing better ones into being, in other words. To paraphrase Catherine Malabou (2008), habit is both a medicine and a poison: at its best it is the grace guiding a meaningful life while at its worst it is the addiction which annihilates all meaning. So a fitter, happier, and more productive life would be one made up of good habits, we know, but such a life, those who have tried and failed to lead it will know, is much easier willed than lived. This means that the virtuous subject is a creature of habit for which those habits are an issue.

William James (1890, 105) was among the first to postulate the 'plastic' structure of the habit forming subject: "weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once", as he so eloquently put it (above). Plastic is viscously impressionable without being formless, it is stable though not brittle and it moves but does not flow. This quite precise material imagery, as Claire Carlisle proposes, is far from a merely poetic or rhetorical achievement on James's part: "Our capacity to acquire habits testifies to this plasticity insofar as it rests on the twin conditions of receptivity and resistance to change" (2013, 31). James's work has proven indispensable within a burgeoning renaissance in habit research (e.g. Barandiaran and Di Paolo 2014; Bennett et al 2013 Carlisle 2014; Sparrow and Hutchinson 2013) taking inspiration from 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Pragmatism (principally the work of William James and John Dewey) and from 19<sup>th</sup> Century French Aristotelianism (principally

Felix Ravaisson's *Of Habit*). Many of the concerns which continue to characterize Business Ethics debates, we will claim, should be restated with respect to how this habit research renaissance accounts for the embodied nature of habit's plasticity and habituation's double-law.

It was Aristotle, of course, who did most to establish the virtue ethics framework within which these diverse intellectual traditions are now re-converging: 'having a habit', he wrote, means having 'a disposition according to which that which is disposed is either well or ill disposed' (Aristotle 1924, book 5, part 20). For Aristotle, the virtues are personal capacities which we learn, improve upon and eventually excel at, over time, through iterative practice. Moral virtue, for contemporary Aristotelians, is therefore 'not an innate trait, but a disposition acquired by the continuous repetition of virtuous acts' (Morales-Sánchez and Cabello-Medina 2015, 159). These habitual acts amount to "a 'second nature' for human beings" (Sison and Ferrero 2015, 83). To become virtuous is to cultivate the habits which best epitomise excellence within a given context (Solomon 1993) and contemporary virtue ethicists habitually teach us that:

you cannot become a good person by studying ethics as a purely philosophical subject: that would be like trying to achieve health by listening to what a physician has to say about health and not acting accordingly (Aristotle, 2000, c.f. Hartman 2013, 172).

The material imagery provided by Félix Ravaisson's 'double-law of habit' and by John Dewey's relational account of habit formation, we'll argue, provides contemporary virtue ethicists with a means of responding to three of their most outspoken critics: situationist social-psychologists; deontological ethicists and communitarian analysts. According to the chief

proponents of the contemporary habit renaissance, there is much more nuance within the potential claims which habit can make upon virtue than its traditional critics have been ready to admit. We concur and close our argument by outlining seven important issues which organisational habit changers need to consider: what we call the seven characteristics of highly effective virtue habituation projects.

## **THE PLASTICITY OF HABIT IN NEUROLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY**

We are all, Hegel suggested “accustomed to the idea of habit”, but it is nevertheless difficult “to determine the Notion of habit” (Hegel 1971, 410). Habit, for its possessors and its analysts alike, is both familiar and uncanny: we all experience it and yet we all struggle to explain what that experience is like. Recent philosophical work suggests that Hegel’s plastic articulation of the nature of mind is compatible with established developments within social psychology and neuro-science (Malabou 2005; Bernacer, and Murillo 2014). Charles Duhigg’s business oriented account of habit, by contrast, reduces all that seemed so complex within Hegel’s philosophy of mind to a circular movement involving just three moments: a cue, a routine, and a reward (Duhigg 2012).

Consider the phone call. It rings, you answer and someone asks how you are. Over time, the response (phone answering), to the cue (phone ringing), becomes cognitively associated with the reward (sympathetic dialogue). This is Duhigg’s ‘habit-loop’. The process of habit formation, for him, is a mind-weak and eventually mind-less mechanical process of act repetition: ‘the cue and reward become intertwined until a powerful sense of anticipation and craving emerges’ (2012, 19). Duhigg’s account of the anticipation and craving characteristic of the habit-loop draws heavily upon Anna Graybiel’s neurological analyses of the brain’s

plasticity (see Duhigg 2012, 296). Graybiel's work brings us closer to the sense for what philosophy can contribute to our understanding of habit's plasticity.

In one of Graybiel's experiments, 'rats were trained to run a T-maze task in which they were cued to turn right or left to receive reward' (2008, 376). After a week, patterns were regularised throughout the maze, brain activity was reduced and rewards were more effortlessly received. This is an empirical instance of what Graybiel (2008, 359) calls 'experience-dependent plasticity'. For neurological researchers such as Graybiel, the notion of plasticity indicates that our brain is capable of changing itself over time. It was first introduced by Donald Hebb in opposition to Pavlovian accounts of psychological conditioning (Carlisle 2014). Rather than saying that psychologists should reduce their object to chains of stimulus and response, Hebb and the neurological studies which his work inspired treated habit-formation as a dispositional matter, demonstrating how plasticity exists not heuristically but materially, at the level of the brain's synapses.

This notion of the brain's plasticity indicates how a non-mechanistic embodied materialism characterises habit formation. The formation of a habit-loop is, on this account, not an automatic outcome of rewards following from cues because individual agency also plays an important role within habituation. According to Catherine Malabou, plasticity combines resistance to change and receptivity to it (2005). She proceeds to draw philosophical consequences from the recent neuroscientific research which demonstrates that brains both form habits, and are also formed by habits. Like the rat running through the maze, our neural networks are formed through the repetition of actions. This repetitious process of habituation, in turn, facilitates future action. Habits, as Carlisle writes, 'develop when a repeated change, such as a movement or a sensation, *makes a difference* to a being's constitution' (2014, 12). A



habit might be the mere repetition of almost identical actions but this repetition makes a qualitative difference to the subject, it changes that subject's very composition, and it does this in a material – that is to say embodied – sense.

What are the practical consequences of habit's empirically demonstrable plasticity? Neuroscientific accounts of the role played by the brain synapses within habit-formation, as Carlisle puts it 'will not by itself lead to human flourishing' (2010, 142). So what can we say about plasticity, not as brain scientists but as applied ethicists in general and as Business Ethicists in particular? "A good human life", Carlisle continues, "can be lived in ignorance of scientific theory, but not in ignorance of habit" (*ibid.*). This recent neuroscience suggests James's and Hegel's earlier intuitions concerning habit's plasticity remain instructive. This insight underpins what now follows: a consideration of the moral consequences of habit's plasticity.

### **THE DOUBLE LAW OF HABITUATION**

As Carlisle (2014; 2013; 2010), Sparrow and Hutchinson (2013) and Sinclair (2015) have insisted, Felix Ravaisson 1838 essay *De l'habitude* provides an indispensable yet often overlooked account of habit's moral ambivalence. Stated briefly, his work explains how habits organise our body and our brain, within an Aristotelian framework. Business Ethicists would do well to pay it attention.

From the outset of his study, Ravaisson indicates that habit combines constancy and change. Through constant repetition, habits alter the disposition 'in which a change occurs' (Ravaisson 2008, 25). To adopt a habit is to undergo a transformation in the potentiality of what one can do, think and feel. It is to modulate one's character. Ravaisson (2008, 25) illustrates this point

about the plasticity of our body and brain through Aristotle's example of throwing a stone into the air (1930). No matter how many times the stone is thrown, its natural disposition doesn't change. Its physical structure may change, particularly if it is dropped, but the stone itself plays no active role here, on account of its inherent passivity. Human beings, in ontological contrast to stones, are capable of acquiring habits because they have a second nature. Unlike stones, which do not experience repetition as repetition, human beings have their habitual experiences as an issue for them. Habitual recurrences modify a conscious character, much like how Graybiel's rats become changed through their habits. Habit, that is, gradually changes the subject's plasticity. This is a gradual process with important moral consequences. For Ravaissou, following Aristotle, virtue becomes iteratively embodied through habituated processes:

Virtue is first of all an effort and wearisome; it becomes something attractive and a pleasure only through practice, as a desire that forgets itself or that is unaware of itself, and gradually it draws near to the holiness of innocence. Such is the very secret of education: its art consists in attracting someone towards the good by action, thus fixing the inclination for it. In this way a second nature is formed.' (Ravaissou 2008, 59).

While Ravaissou's work on habit, according to Carlisle, theorises 'the good life within the Aristotelian ethical tradition' (2013, 20), it is also indebted to what Bishop Butler and Maine de Biran called 'the double law of habit' (Carlisle and Sinclair 2008). Habits, in accordance with this law, are drawn in two opposing directions: 'the continuity or repetition of passion weakens it', on the one hand, and 'the continuity or repetition of action exalts or strengthens it' (Ravaissou, 2008, 49), on the other. The processual law of habituation is double because it both strengthens *and* weakens through repetition. What was once new and technically difficult

- playing an instrument, riding a bike or speaking well in public, for example, becomes easier through habitual repetition. And yet, what was once exciting and perhaps even inspiring – a new guitar, a new bike, a new turn of phrase, can very easily become tedious through repetition. Or, in Ravaisson's own example (2008, 51), any child can grow accustomed to noise and swinging sensations ushering them to sleep while another child might require peace and tranquillity for the very same reasons. The difference is a matter of differing processes of habituation.

A common principle underpins the double law of habit for Ravaisson. Passivity converts into activity and activity into passivity on account of an 'unreflected spontaneity' or 'obscure tendency' that allows individuals to both anticipate and crave future changes (2008, 51). In passive habituation, this spontaneity manifests as a resistance to impressions coming from without accompanied by a craving for a missing sensation. The child trying to fall asleep forms a desire for the sound and movement to which she became accustomed. This is not an automated response, however: when the noise stops, the child realises it has stopped. In active habituation, on the other hand, the anticipation of change is less the result of an active choice and more an inclination to act. The professional footballer, for the sake of another example, has developed what Ravaisson would call an 'inclination that no longer awaits the commandments of the will but rather anticipates them' (2008, 51). Repetition of habit, that is to say training, ensures that the skilled footballer 'increasingly anticipates both the impression of external objects in sensibility, and the will in activity' (*ibid.*, 55.).

The double law of habit, Ravaisson surmises 'can be explained only by the development of a Spontaneity that is at once active and passive, equally opposed to mechanical Fatality and to reflective Freedom' (*ibid.*). This unreflected spontaneity in habit is, Ravaisson insists 'a

moving middle term' between freedom and necessity 'which advances by an imperceptible progress from one extremity to the other' (*ibid.*, 59). Our habits might take hold beyond the threshold of our consciousness but what guides this process is a kind of embodied intelligence. Habits, then, can embody choices because habituation, for Ravaisson, is not the mechanical and automatic response to a cue but an embodied tendency through which effort levels are dissipated in their being anticipated.

On the matter of virtuous habituation, then, Ravaisson explains that the formation of a virtue of charity, for instance, bears witness to the transformation of 'the passive emotions of pity' into the 'helpful activity and inner joy of charity' (Ravaisson 2008, 69). Through charitable habituation we can redirect our moral choices so that we no longer rely on our receptivity to the passions but instead develop an almost unconscious spontaneity to act charitably. There are important consequences in this observation for Business Ethicists concerned with intervening at the level of habit, as we will discuss later.

## **PLASTIC HABITUATION IN CONTEXT**

Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while working in a very different intellectual context, the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey affirmed Ravaissons' intuition that habit is an habituated disposition which anticipates the future. He added the important observation that habituation occurs in a social setting. For Dewey, our habituated dispositions are formed through social customs, routines and rituals (see also Betta 2018). It is from these, he argued, that we draw our sense for what is socially acceptable and strive to act accordingly. Social conventions therefore play a crucial role in how we distinguish between the virtuous and the vicious (Dewey 1922). Dewey's addition of habit's sociological dimension provides us with a basis for synthesising Ravaisson's account of the double law of habit with a sense for habit's plasticity.

For Dewey, ‘the essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response’ (1922, 32). This predisposition is, he suggests, much more important than our ‘vague, general, conscious choices’ (*ibid.*). All habits, as he puts it:

are demands for certain kinds of activity, and they constitute the self. In any intelligible sense of the term they are will. They form our effective desires and they furnish us with our working capacities. They rule our thoughts, determining which shall appear and be strong and which shall pass from light into obscurity’ (1922, 21).

We are our habits, Dewey suggests in line with the tradition of work which sees habit as malleable, in the sense that they hold us, form us, and compel us, without ultimately determining us. Whereas Ravaissou’s account of virtue is faithful to Aristotle’s metaphysical articulation, in its suggestion that a divine grace ultimately governs the double law of habit, Dewey’s analysis of habituation prioritizes the mundane relationship between the individual and the environment. Habit, as Dewey puts it, shows the individual ‘using and incorporating the environment in which the later has its say surely as the former’ (1922, 15). Dewey’s account of habit, therefore, is not teleological but ‘transactional’ (Sullivan, 2013, 236). The interdependent relationship between the individual and the environment out of which habits emerge, not a metaphysical strife towards perfection, is what ‘demonstrates their plasticity’ (Sullivan 2013, 239). It is habit’s plasticity, its material mixture between receptivity towards change and resistance to change, which constitutes the self. All of which makes it fallacious to conceive of habits as the effect of will power. All of which also makes it fallacious to conceive of habits as the automatic response to environmental stimuli. Dewey suggests that with habit, the response in fact precedes the stimulus (Menand, 2011). Like Ravaissou, he affirms that

habit has its own momentum and tendency which organises our beliefs, our attitudes and our will.

By arguing habits are plastic, then, we follow what recent neurological researchers mean: resistance to change and receptivity towards change are embodied through habitual repetition. The moral consequences of the mechanism underpinning this process of habituation can be understood through what Ravaisson called the ‘double law of habit’. This double law, we qualified, selects not through a teleological principle but through a transactional process. The important applied question remains: how can this account of habit’s malleability inform Business Ethicists? In turning to this question now we will also engage with two intimately related questions. Firstly: what are the limitations of rendering virtue dependent upon habit? Secondly: how can these limitations be countered?

## **OBJECTIONS TO HABIT**

Applied ethicists in general, and Business Ethicists in particular, have raised three objections to habit’s claims upon virtue which cannot be ignored. Firstly, there is the objection that virtues and habits do not exist as subjective dispositions, if at all (the Ontological Objection). Secondly, there is the objection that virtue has little, if anything, to do with habit (the Deontological Objection). Finally, there is the objection that virtues and habits are collectively, not individually, determined (the Communitarian Objection). We will successively outline and respond to each of these objections in what follows, closing the discussion with a summary table. We then proceed, in the following section, to posit seven practical implications of this section’s exegesis and defence.

### **The Ontological Objection**

Gillian Elizabeth Anscombe's critical diagnosis of the Anglophone moral philosophical tradition helped establish the ongoing dialogue between moral philosophy and social psychology on which the ontological objection to virtue ethics continues to rest. "The differences between the well-known English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day are of little importance" (1958, 1), Anscombe wrote. And so it is "not possible for us at present to do moral philosophy", she continued, "until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking" (*ibid.*). Moral philosophers should, Anscombe asserted, understand ethical action as a particular kind of human action in general: for this they require psychological concepts. Human psychology, indeed, should be understood as the grounds for an account of human morality, not the other way around:

the proof that an unjust man is a bad man would require a positive account of justice as a "virtue". This part of the subject-matter of ethics, is however, completely closed to us until we have an account of what *type of characteristic* a virtue is – a problem, not of ethics, but of conceptual analysis – and how it relates to the actions in which it is instanced: a matter which I think Aristotle did not succeed in really making clear (*ibid.*, 4)

Anscombe claimed that virtue ethics, while not without its shortcomings, was compatible with a psychologically nuanced moral philosophy. She affirmed this against the divine proposals behind "legalistic" systems of ethical obligation (1958, 3-7), against the "absurd" proposals within Kantian deontology (1958, 2), against the "flawed" proposals throughout Bentham and Mill's utilitarianisms (1958, 3), and against the "vulgar" proposals made by Sidgwick in "the transition from Mill to Moore" (1958, 9). Her multiple tradition defying stance notwithstanding, Anscombe went on to concede both that she herself was not capable of

synthesising virtue ethics with psychology, and to question whether any of her contemporaries were appropriately disposed (1958, 14). At stake within any modern moral philosophical revival, she declared, was nothing less than a return to “how Plato and Aristotle talk”, a return which needed to be mindful of the many dead-ends already encountered since the Ancient Greeks:

it can be seen that philosophically there is a huge gap, at present unfillable as far as we are concerned, which needs to be filled by an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and above all of human “flourishing”. And it is the last concept that appears most doubtful (1958, 15).

The challenge Anscombe laid down to her successors was that of explaining, through the ‘is’ of psychology and the ‘ought’ of virtue ethics, the very existence of any good and just character, that is, the very existence of any character “who habitually refuses to commit or participate in any unjust actions for fear of any consequences, or to obtain any advantage, for himself or anybody else” (1958, 14). Attempts to fill this daunting though not insurmountable gap persist today in a fractious rather than synthetic debate. “Situationism”, in particular, has established its psychological findings in opposition to virtue ethics (e.g. Doris and Stich 2005; Harman 1999, 2003; Merritt, 2000). Both virtues and habits are explained by the situationist as epiphenomenal behaviours which are entirely reducible to the contextual phenomenology, hence ‘the ontological objection’.

Situationists also reduce ethical business practices to environmental factors. Take the virtue of honesty. In order to explain the very existence of an honest character, as Anscombe would have us do, we would require not only an account of the virtue of honesty but also an explanatory



account of any character's honesty's 'behavioural consistency' (Alzola, 2008, 344). Where does any character's honesty's consistency come from? For the situationist, honesty is an entirely 'unreflective response' (Morales-Sánchez and Cabello-Medina 2015,160). What goes for honesty here can also go for any of the so-called virtues. Behavioural consistency, situationism teaches, is predominately if not exclusively mindless, that is to say, predominately if not exclusively situationally attributable. Habit might well be "a tool for character development", as Alavudeen et al put it, but it is a tool which has very little if anything to do with "conscious choice and affirmation" (2008, 9).

The Milgram and Stanford Prison experiments are routinely cited in support of this scientifically demonstrated if morally bleak conclusion. Taken alongside the conclusions of other social-psychological experiments which provide the basis for situationist interventions – the 'Good Samaritan' experiment in particular - they challenge the faith we might have in virtue. Harman has infamously suggested that there is in fact no 'empirical basis for the existence of character traits' (1999, upagn) and here, in its most extreme form, situationists trivialise the relative importance of virtue to the point of doubting its very existence. This is hardly the situation which Anscombe had in mind.

### ***Response to the Ontological Objection***

For Hartman (2013), "becoming virtuous is a matter of reflexivity as well as habit". This statement allows a residue of virtue to persist within the very phenomena which situationists seek to reduce to just so many instances of behavioural regularity. Such an allowance, however minimal, has found sustained, impassioned and formidable expression and elaboration within the work of Julia Annas (e.g. 2003). Her ongoing project of resuscitating virtue ethics, against situationist reductionism in general and Harman's 'eliminativism' in particular (Annas, 2003,

23), reverberates within recent characterisations of the ‘unique, personal touch’ (Sison and Ferrero 2015, 83) highlighted in the name of virtue by contemporary Business Ethicists. The analysis of virtuous character formation within organisational settings, for its most penetrating recent proponent, is less a matter of explaining ‘persons or situations’ and more a matter of explaining ‘persons *and* situations and persons *in* situations’ (Alzola, 2008, 353, see also Alzola, 2012). Such recent defences of virtue ethics do not seek to undermine the relevance of social psychological insight. They rather strike a conciliatory tone, rendering social psychology and virtue ethics in common cause in the pursuit of a realistic moral philosophy. This is much more in keeping with the project which Anscombe originally had in mind.

An important variation on this recent conciliatory theme had already been struck in work which Anscombe’s seminal article neglected to mention: John Dewey’s. Much like Annas and Alzola, Dewey’s account of virtuous habituation dispenses with the individual/environment dualism. The sense for the malleability of habit provided him with the analytical basis for arguing the following:

Honesty, chastity, malice, peevishness, courage, triviality, industry, irresponsibility are not private possessions of a person. They are working adaptations of personal capacities with enviroing forces. All virtues and vices are habits which incorporate objective forces. They are inter-actions of elements contributed by the make-up of an individual with elements supplied by the out-door world. They can be studied as objectively as physiological functions, and they can be modified by change of either personal or social elements. (Dewey 1922, 16)

Character is, Dewey continues, the ‘interpenetration of habits’ (1922, 38). Without habit we would be nothing more than an ‘untied bundle’ of ‘isolated acts’ (Dewey 1922, 38). This means that for Dewey, the formation of virtuous character requires behavioural integration without the process being reducible to an aggregation of all integrated moments. Weak character, on the other hand, is a disposition ‘in which habits alternate with one another rather than embody one another’ (ibid). Between situational contingency and dispositional rigidity, in other words, we find habitual plasticity. Character, as Solomon puts it, ‘is never fully formed and settled. It is always vulnerable to circumstances and trauma. People change, and they are malleable’ (2003, 45). The findings of virtue undermining social psychological experiments, on such a view, reveal not so much the absence of virtue as the lack of habitually integrated virtue. For, as Solomon (2003, 55) reminds us, ‘one third of the subjects in the Milgram experiment did quit’. An appreciation of habit’s inherent plasticity allows us to explain why. Alzola’s important manifesto for a ‘middle way between Situationism and Dispositionalism in organizational scholarship and business ethics’ (Alzola, 2008, 353), to which we would lend our support, already had its plastic foundations set elsewhere.

### **The Deontological Objection**

Our response to the ontological critique of virtue, which asserts that habit is malleably formed between the individual and the environment, doesn’t yet provide us with sufficient grounds for refuting the allegation that habit is mindless. Within Kantian ethics, in particular, we find the allegation that habit has nothing to do with virtue. This is because to act morally, for Kant, requires something other than ‘a mechanical habit, it requires a will to do good’ (Dierksmeier, 2013, 605). So without the application of rational will and the corresponding sense of duty which grants moral action its definitively Kantian character, to be acting out of habit is to be

acting mindlessly, automatically, stupidly. We now turn to the delineation of and response to this deontological objection to habit.

Kant is a deed-oriented ethicist: he provides a maxim by which deeds can be assessed as ethical, or otherwise. A difficulty for deontology's advocates, both within and beyond Business Ethics, is that we can never know for sure whether an act is done out of a subjectively adjudicated duty to generalise it as a rule, or if the actor simply says, opportunistically, that s/he has been thinking along these lines. We can never know, in other words, if the one who says s/he responds to the call of duty has done so after a period of conscientious deliberation, or if s/he has been merely lying. If the actor genuinely believes they are acting in such a way that their act should be undertaken by all others in their situation, we are amidst an exemplary deontological act. This nuanced expectation betrays deontology's fundamental difference from both virtue ethics and social psychology. Kant's moral philosophy is less an answer to the question of how to live a good life and more a pronouncement of the legitimacy of the moral law. For Kant, therefore, 'all habits are objectionable' (Kant 1974, 28): they are reactions, as opposed to actions. As he writes:

virtue cannot be defined and valued as a mere aptitude or . . . a long-standing habit of morally good actions, acquired by practice. For unless this aptitude results from considered, firm, and continually purified principles, then, like any other mechanism of technically-practical reason, it is neither armed for all situations nor adequately insured against the changes that new temptations could bring about" (Kant, 1996, 146).

In both his anthropological and his moral writings, then, Kant vehemently opposes the view that a discussion of ethics amounts to a discussion of habits. And yet habits, according to Kant,

are not evil: they are, like mechanical processes, essentially without moral character. They are, in other words, amoral.

Markedly unlike Kant's rule based ethical procedural approaches to virtue, Aristotle insists on the judgment not of isolated practices but of habituated practitioners. In contrast to deontological appeals to duty and utilitarian appeals to consequences, then, virtue ethicists consider the contextual specificity of virtue and character formation to be the very key to the ethics puzzle (Solomon 1997). Virtue ethics therefore encourages us to assess morality not as the expression of underlying rules or insights but rather as the systematic execution of a set of observable habits which have been refined by exemplary characters over time. Kant might seem to focus on character to the extent that he focuses on the moral subject's rational adjudication but his moral test is ultimately procedural whereas in virtue ethics there is an important role given to *ad hominem* moral assessment. Kant, with his focus on the guarantees provided by a good will, as opposed to the actions performed in the name of habits, apparently drives a wedge between habit and virtue. Aristotle, with his focus on habituation, apparently brings habit and virtue into proximity with one another. There is more to this superficial semblance of paradigmatic incommensurability, however.

### ***Response to the Deontological Objection***

Following Ravaison, it is both possible as well as productive to consider how Kantian and Aristotelian ethics, rather than being understood in opposition, can be productively brought together in pursuit of a phenomenology of habit. At the very least, this requires us to allow for the possibility that habits are not fundamentally opposed to will. Ravaison's image of habit as a 'moving middle term' (2008, 51) indicates his work's generous hermeneutical strategy. Habits, Ravaison suggests, are not devoid of intelligence, even though they are without

conscious will and reflection. This is because our habits are embodied. They are built up, within us, over time. Morality, for Ravaisson, is therefore not a matter of exercising a good will beyond any habit. Morality, rather, can put our already embodied habits to work for the sake of the good. The difference between habit and virtue is therefore one of degree, not kind.

It is on this point and many other points that the tradition which encourages our return to the work of Ravaisson and Dewey in particular, and to the plastic appreciation of habit more generally, are united. Contemporary moral philosophy cannot be grounded upon a metaphysical distinction between the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa* because, as these authors long ago knew, ethical action requires a necessarily embodied dimension. The moral question, following the plastic account of habit, is not how I should get rid of my embodied habits in order to become virtuous. The moral question is rather one of creating what Dewey called ‘intelligent habits’, which he opposes to ‘dead habits’ and mere ‘routines’ (Dewey 1922, 71). Intelligent habits, for their part, are connected to skill and art, in the Aristotelian sense of *techne*, which is itself a constituent of *phronesis* (e.g. Bernacer, and Murillo 2014). So if good guitar playing is a habit which has become embodied then so too is virtue.

Embodied habits help us locate the nuances of a situation and to improvise whenever appropriate. Embodied habits, rather than disembodied rules, are the condition of possibility for any such differentiation. They are what provide us with the basis for making a difference. Or they are, as Malabou (2008) suggest, the repetition which makes a difference, rather than a rule derived action which consists in the sheer imitation of the same. Habit’s plasticity should therefore not be opposed to virtuous originality: ‘the most precious part of plasticity’, as Dewey puts it, ‘consists in the ability to form habits of independent judgment and of inventive initiation’ (1922, 97). Dewey, like Ravaisson, insists that the plasticity of habit does not stand

in opposition to will or impulse. His plastic appreciation shares with Ravaissou the sense that habit 'spirals' between instinctive behaviour and reflective and deliberate behaviour. This is, to repeat, a matter of degree, rather than kind. Habit is not an activity that eventually becomes disconnected from rational behaviour. Habit is rather an integral part of will, of creativity and of judgement.

Consider, as Ravaissou (2008, 49) asks us to do, the distinction between the drunkard and the connoisseur. Both are habitual drinkers but there is nevertheless an important distinction to be made in terms of what they do with their habits. While the drunkard moves down along the spiral towards the eventually non-reflective place of addiction, the connoisseur develops a refined sensibility towards nuance and so with it a heightened - at its highest exemplary - capacity for discernment. This is a gastronomical distinction but its moral instructiveness should not be denied. Much like a connoisseur in matters of aesthetic taste, the morally virtuous person is characterised by an embodied sensibility to the nuances of a given context. The distinction between thoughtless addiction and thoughtful grace therefore doesn't require us to place habit on one side of amorality and virtue on the other. It requires us, instead, to realise that those we call virtuous know better than the non-virtuous what they should do with their habits. In this they set an example of habituation which others might follow. Followers, just like those they follow, will express the habitual capacity for moral improvisation which the notion of plasticity would lead us to expect, albeit to a less exemplary extent.

It could certainly be injected that this is not always the case: that actions can be repeated without virtue being born. The solution to this problem, however, is not to be found in rejecting habit's claim to morality as such. For it is in the plasticity related to habit that we discover why some do not accept what Ravaissou considered the grace of habit. If habit is ontologically

marked by a combination of receptivity and resistance towards the outside, it is this very relationship that can help us account for ‘the possibility of refusing’ (Carlisle 2010, 138) the virtues that are given through habit.

### **The Communitarian Objection**

Even if, against what we’ve called the ontological objection, we can clarify the psychological way in which virtue persists within habit, and even if, against what we’ve called the deontological objection, we can qualify the moral character of habitual action, a final objection remains. Habituation, those who work within what we’re calling a communitarian tradition, occurs not at the level of the isolated subject but rather at the level of the common group. It is to the negotiation of this final objection, and its two major strands (the political-philosophical and the sociological) that we will now turn. As with before, once we’ve outlined the objection, we will proceed to mount our plasticity oriented defence.

Habits, those beholden to both strands of the communitarian objection insist, aren’t actions which individuals undertake as a matter of inner-directed personal discretion. Habits, rather, are actions which individuals undertake as a means of collective participation. Habits, according to this position, are not a process of a solipsistic soul-searching’s having become deed. Rather habits, for the communitarian, are an ongoing process of recursive-iterative group-participation: they both signify a collective’s own continuity and inform the manner of an individual’s contribution to that collective. The habits of a collective are nevertheless irreducible to the outcome of any aggregation exercise, however complicated that exercise might be (Savage 2015).



This is not simply a matter of allowing the concepts of synergy or discord to explain away the difference between the group and the sum of its constituent individuals, however. The communitarian objection to moral individualism is much more radical. Community virtues and individual virtues are irreducible in principle, the communitarian insists, not because they are different in degree but because they are different in kind. So while the political-philosophical and the sociological strands of the objection differ in their details, they are united in their shared objection to the naïve empiricist depiction of habit along methodologically individualist lines. The group, for the communitarian, is other than the sum of its parts. So it should be with any account of the relationship between virtue and habit.

The political-philosophical variant of this objection is most apparent in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. Inspired by Anscombe's manifesto for a social-psychological resuscitation of virtue ethics, on the one hand (2007, 53), and by Marx's critique of political economy, on the other (2007, xiii), MacIntyre suggested that it is within specific communities, through their everyday practices, that individuals form their senses of virtue and of vice. So whereas for Aristotle, *Ethics* underpinned *Politics*, MacIntyre suggested that we should look both to the communities which individuals find themselves in, and to the individuals which constitute these communities, when analyzing contemporary morality. His framework, he insisted, is developed for analytic rather than dogmatic reasons. Whatever value *After Virtue* has, writes MacIntyre, resides not in its rhetorical capitulation to collectivism but in its realistic explanation of what contemporary virtue is. In the third prologue to his now classical text he makes a deliberate attempt to protect his work from dogmatic misappropriation along the following lines:

defenders of liberal and individualist modernity...frame their objections in terms of the liberalism versus communitarian debate, supposing me to be a communitarian, something that I have never been (2007, xii).

We attribute the label ‘communitarianism’ to MacIntyre quite advisedly, therefore. Our use of it here indicates that MacIntyre’s account of virtue’s relationship to habit constitutes the ‘community’ as an object of analysis, rather than as an object of affirmation. His line of self-clarification outlined above continues in the paragraph cited below and it is in this qualified sense that we speak of his work as *analytically* ‘communitarian’:

My own critique of liberalism derives from a judgment that the best type of human life, that in which the tradition of the virtues is most adequately embodied, is lived by those engaged in constructing and sustaining forms of community directed towards the shared achievement of those common goods without which the ultimate human good cannot be achieved...what liberalism promotes is a kind of institutional order that is inimical to the construction and sustaining of the types of communal relationship required for the best kind of human life (*ibid.*)

Not only does MacIntyre set his account of virtue out in opposition to political dogmatism, however, he also attempts to distinguish it from corporate managerialism. His dismissal of business ethics, in particular, is scornful of what he sees as its advocate’s elitist pretense towards exclusionary self-congratulation (2007, xiii). A community is not a community, for MacIntyre, if it particularizes authority in a manner which has not met with majoritarian consent. So if a community – corporate or otherwise - fails to encourage an individual’s flourishing or, worse still, if it denies meaningful activity to that individual, then it is the

community, rather than the individual, to which the virtuously impoverished modes of habituation are to be attributed (Beadle, 2002).

The sociological variant of the communitarian critique of habit shares the political philosophical dissatisfaction with moral individualism, also for non-normative reasons. The very discipline of sociology, according to Charles Camic (1986), just about survived a lengthy period of avoiding the concept of habit for its chief practitioner's justifiable fear of being defeated upon the psychologist's terrain. Habitus, a concept most readily associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Norbert Elias, was one of the conceptual consequences of these long-standing and still ongoing disciplinary turf wars. Along Bourdieu-inspired lines (2010) habitus provides the sociologist with a means of initially conceptualizing then subsequently analysing how moral and aesthetic values are contested between actors. Such values are taken to be socially relational, rather than individually inherent, from the outset. Along Eliasian lines, the concept of habitus provides the sociologist with an analytic mechanism through which unintended consequences of intended moral action seem more likely, though never inevitable (1997). The historical-sociological dynamics of habituation, for Elias, are always much more complicated than any moralist would have us believe. Together with Bourdieu, he represents a more general sociological critique of any individual's habit's claims upon virtue.

### ***Response to the Communitarian Objection***

In both its political philosophical and the sociological variety, what we've called communitarianism fervently opposes the epistemological and ontological assumptions which characterize contemporary methodological individualism in particular, and solipsistic philosophical anthropology more generally. For MacIntyre, the community is part of any individual's prospects of and capacities for virtuous habituation. For Bourdieu and Elias,

‘habitus’ precipitates the dissolution of sociology’s structure/agency problem. Their shared disdain for liberal epistemology in general and methodological individualism in particular is very much of a piece with all that we have written so far in the name of the plasticity of habit. Here’s John Dewey, for example, sounding remarkably like MacIntyre in his cautioning against the hubris of anti-populist, anti-majoritarian, political and economic managerialism:

Those who wish a monopoly of social power find desirable the separation of habit and thought, action and soul, so characteristic of history. For the dualism enables them to do the thinking and planning, while others remain the docile, even if awkward, instruments of execution (Dewey 1922, 72)

Dewey worries, more specifically, about how the emergence of a specifically managerialist class narrows the scope of the role played by the democratic process in the specification of a good life lived in common. Instead of democracy, we have technocracy. These words strike us today with an air of prophecy as do, less distantly, MacIntyre’s. This emergent managerialism isn’t only morally suspicious, Dewey writes, it is also analytically dubious. Here he is again, also in *Human Nature and Conduct*, this time sounding very much like Bourdieu and Elias:

We often fancy that institutions, social custom, collective habit, have been formed by the consolidation of individual habits. In the main this supposition is false to fact. To a considerable extent customs, or wide-spread uniformities of habit, exist because individuals face the same situation and react in like fashion. But to a larger extent customs persist because individuals form their personal habits under conditions set by prior customs. An individual usually acquires the morality as he inherits the speech of his social group. The activities of the group are already there, and some assimilation of

his own acts to their pattern is a pre-requisite of a share therein, and hence of having any part in what is going on (Dewey 1922, 57).

Dewey’s plastic account of habit preempts aspects of MacIntyre’s communitarianism by prioritizing processes of collective negotiation above the hubris of top-down imposition. It also preempts Bourdieu and Elias’s break from the structure-agency dichotomy by highlighting how habit – and habitus - is an object neither for methodological individualism nor structural determinism. Habit, rather, is always negotiated by individuals within environments. The manner of this negotiation cannot be known in advance. Rather, it is the role of the analyst to track habit, over time, how there are formed through what Ravaisson called the double law of habit within concrete settings, across what Bourdieu (2010) would later call ‘fields’ and what Elias would later call ‘lengthening chains of human interdependency’ (1984). Between the communitarian and the virtue ethicist, there exists a lot of common ground waiting to be explored.

<b>Argument from</b>	<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Objection</b>	<b>Response</b>
Situationism	Evidence	Virtuous habits don’t exist	Plasticity explains the dynamic relationship between individual and environment
Deontology	Good Will	Habits are never virtuous	Habit spirals between automatic response and deliberate cultivation
Political Communitarianism	Collaboration	Habits and virtue are collaboratively negotiated	Technocracy is antithetical to democracy
Sociological Communitarianism	Habitus	Habitus is dynamically contested and unforeseeable	Habit change programme unpredictability is complicated by multiple agents

**Figure One:** Arguments against Virtue Ethics and the Response from Plasticity

## IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS ETHICS

Capping off an exemplary rendition of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Bragues (2006) pronounced a many pointed manifesto of what Aristotelian virtue ethics can still offer Business Ethicists. We hope to channel something of that spirit here by affirming seven practical consequences which follow from our synthetic conceptualisation of virtue's malleability. These seven characteristics of highly effective virtue habituation projects, as we might call them, pay a slightly ironic homage to a much more widely celebrated, though far from exemplary, Aristotle rendition.

1. *Habit is more a disposition that guide change than a mechanism that resist change.*  
Executives should avoid reducing habit to something that blocks changes in general and moral development in particular. This requires less an appreciation of habit as some mindless repetition and more an appreciation of habit as a plastic disposition in us all. Change managers, in particular, should refocus their concern away from efforts designed to avoid or break habits and towards an acknowledgment of the ubiquity of individual habits as both resistant towards, and receptive to, any change. This starts with admitting that an acquired habit is not a state brought about by a cue, but a disposition that anticipates future actions.
2. *Habits form our character.* Executives should recognize habit's ubiquity. As a recent editorial put it: 'We begin to learn ethics by habituation, and employees already have ethical (or unethical) habits' (Sison, Hartman and Fontrodona 2012, 209). We can all change our habits, bad and good but not in the same way and at the same pace. Habits are deeply embodied over time in us. Habit is, as Ravaisson (2008, 52) argued 'beyond,

beneath the region of will, personality and consciousness'. To change one habit is to change one-self.

3. *To change habit is to change the act, as well as the intention.* Executives must avoid the assumption that the encouragement of ethical business practices is predicated upon the moral enlightenment of individuals. This is not to say that good intentions have nothing to do with ethics. It is only to take habits as seriously as they need to be taken. To change habits is not solely a matter of acknowledging moral problems before making a firm ethical commitment towards putting them right. To intervene in habit is to intervene at the level of sensations and involuntary thoughts, slowly cultivating these in other ways.
4. *Habits are formed between individuals and their environment.* Executives should not reduce habits to individuals. To think the individual's character can be converted from 'worse to better' (1922, 20), by 'preaching good will' or by working on 'the hearts of men' (1922, 22) is nothing short of a belief in 'magic' as Dewey (1922, 20) puts it. We can change habits, rather, 'by modifying conditions, by an intelligent selecting and weighting of the objects which engage attention and which influence the fulfilment of desires' (1922, 20). This does not mean, however, that individual habits are mere environmental products. Plasticity ensures that any individual can respond differently to the same cue. Habitual plasticity is built up by all of us over time. The solution, if it can be called such, is to privilege both the individual *and* the environment.
5. *We change habits, they change us.* Executives much find a way of responding to habit's paradox: repetition is constituent of, rather than opposed to, the new. As Grosz

characterises Ravaisson's work, habit transforms 'the constrained into degree of freedom, degrees of openness' (2013, 234). It does this by introducing 'the needs of the organism to its environment and inserting its environment into the behaviour of the organism' (2013, 234). To acknowledge the plasticity in habit is to acknowledge that the repetition of habit not only constrain and resist change. It also conditions our openness and capability to change by initiating a disposition within our very potential to change.

6. *Habits are virtuous and vicious.* Important as they are, habits provide executives with no ethical panacea. Habits can both diminish the effort in our activities and blind us to the effects of our actions. This relates to what Malabou describes as the pharmakon of habit (2008): cure *and* poison, grace *and* addiction. Habits are the basis of moral betterment in that they give consistency to our ever-changing involvements. But habits are also the rut we get stuck in which disrupts even our best intentions.
  
7. *Changing habits within business are always an ethical concern.* Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the moral duplicity of habit means that executives must recognise plasticity's lack of a clear normative principle. At best, it helps articulate a sense for the conditions for ethical behavioural change. The habits of an individual are both what blocks moral betterment and also what builds it. The point is not to differentiate between good habits and bad habits. The point is rather that in so far as habit is connected to our plasticity as human beings, their very discussion is always an ethical one. On the one hand, habit automatically opens up moral questions: should we conduct ourselves otherwise?, should we regulate corporations otherwise?, should we undertake politics otherwise? On the other hand, habit automatically provides us with a way of



understanding any ethical demand: there can be habits without virtue but there can be no virtue without habits

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In this paper we have argued that Business Ethics have much to gain from the habit research renaissance's accounts of the embodied nature of habit's plasticity and of habituation's double-law. We described habit's plasticity and overviewed its relevance to discussions of virtue. Habit, in the words of Ravaisson, is a 'moving middle term' between will and necessity. It is an embodied intelligence which eventually diminishes effort. This diminishment requires a repetition which makes a difference to who we are and what we can do - it forms how we interact with ourselves and the world.

In particular, we argued that Ravaisson and Dewey's reflections on the plasticity of habit provide contemporary virtue ethicists with a means of responding to three of their most outspoken critics: situationist social-psychologists; deontological ethicists and communitarian analysts. The habit renaissance responds to the social-psychologist debunking of notions of character by complicating the distinction between person and environment and thus our everyday assumptions about what it means to change behavior. It responds to deontology's claim that habits are pure mechanisms and senseless imitations by reminding us of the embodiment of our moral virtues and vices. And it responds to communitarian critique by pointing out that our habits are not our own but in a dynamic relationship to our surroundings.

Such a plastic appreciation of habit provides a basis for understanding how virtuous habituation occurs. It helps us to understand how virtues and vices take hold within our moral development, constantly interacting with our ever changing environments. Our habits modulate how we

interact with ourselves and the world. The plasticity of habit ensures that we each have the capacity to craft a virtuous life out of whatever we habitually repeat both within and beyond Business.

### **Conflict of interest**

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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