'Let not habit do violence to you . . .'
Parmenides, ‘On Nature’

‘Rest and silence awaken.’
Ravaisson, Of Habit
BLESSING OR CURSE?

In 1799 the Académie des sciences in Paris announced an essay competition on the subject of habit. In the introduction to his prize-winning essay, Pierre Maine de Biran points out that his subject matter presents him with a peculiar task:

Reflect on what is habitual! Who could or would wish to begin such reflection? How should one suspect some mystery in what one has always seen, done, or felt? About what should one inquire, should one be in doubt, should one be astonished? Heavy bodies fall, movement is communicated; the stars revolve over our heads; nature spreads out before our eyes her greatest phenomena: and what subject for wonder, what subject for inquiry could there be in such familiar things?¹

Maine de Biran is referring here to the difficulty of reflecting on ‘what is habitual’ rather than on habit itself. Nevertheless, habit could be added to his list of the familiar things that we normally allow to go unnoticed. Habit is, quite literally, an everyday phenomenon. Each morning we are carried along by the force of habit – out of bed, to the bathroom, down the stairs, out to work – and each evening we are carried home.
again. As David Hume observes, ‘custom, where it is strongest, not only covers our natural ignorance, but even conceals itself, and seems not to take place, merely because it is found in the highest degree.’

Our tendency to overlook habit can be explained by one aspect of habit itself: the way in which familiarity and repetition dull our senses. Marcel Proust describes habit as a ‘heavy curtain’ which ‘conceals from us almost the whole universe, and prevents us from knowing ourselves.’ Not only this: habit ‘cuts off from things which we have witnessed a number of times the root of profound impression and of thought which gives them their real meaning.’ Proust realized that an artist has to draw back, or tear open, this curtain of habit, so that the most familiar features of our world become visible, meaningful, and cause for wonder. But this is also the philosopher’s task. Although it is often said – quoting Plato or Aristotle – that philosophy begins with wonder, the wondering state of mind is only reached by first penetrating the heavy curtain of habit.

So habit is a peculiarly philosophical issue, and it is also an important and profound feature of ordinary life. A few European philosophers have gone so far as to claim, like many teachers in the Buddhist tradition, that habit provides ‘an answer to the problem of the self’, that our continuing identity through time and change is produced by the tenacity of habit. If this is true – and perhaps even if it is not quite true – then habit’s elusiveness and obscurity belong to the mystery of human selfhood. The question of habit may be inseparable from our hardest, deepest, most insistent question: who are we? who am I?

In spite of the difficulty of reflecting on habit, most of our great philosophers have something interesting to say about it.
Often their views conflict with one another. Aristotle thinks that habit lies at the heart of moral life. Spinoza argues that it leads us astray and prevents us from perceiving the deep intelligibility of nature. Hume regards custom as ‘the great guide of human life’, since it helps to make our world orderly and predictable. Kant suggests that it undermines our innate moral worth, making us ‘ridiculous’ and machine-like. Hegel claims that habit liberates us, although it can also be a deadening force. Nietzsche compares long-lasting habit to ‘a tyrant’ – but, fearing that life without habit would be ‘intolerable’, he recommends cultivating a succession of ‘brief habits’. And when we consider the history of European philosophy with the question of habit in mind, less prominent thinkers also come into the foreground: Joseph Butler, Thomas Reid and Félix Ravaisson, as well as Maine de Biran, have each made significant contributions to the philosophy of habit.

From this long tradition of enquiry into habit emerge two lines of interpretation. According to the first, habit is an obstacle to reflection and a threat to freedom. Insofar as we think and act out of habit, we are unable to know ourselves or reflect critically on the world, and so we are intellectually, morally, and spiritually impoverished. Habit is a degradation of life, reducing spontaneity and vitality to mechanical routine. Habit is the rut we get stuck in. It makes us bored with ourselves, and boring to others. According to the second interpretation, habit is an indispensable part of life: it not only brings order, consistency and comfort to our ever-changing experiences, but also allows us to be creative and free. On this view, habit is the living, dynamic embodiment of our intelligence and our desire. Habit underlies the distinctive character of every being, but shared habits bring individuals
together into communities – and therefore habit forms the basis of ethical and religious life.

These two contrasting views even emerge in response to the question of the relationship between habit and philosophy. As Maine de Biran points out, habit can be an obstacle to reflection, and here he echoes many other philosophers who have struggled against the force of habit. In the fifth century BC Parmenides issued a warning that has resounded through our philosophical tradition: ‘let not habit do violence to you in the empirical way of exercising an unseeing eye and a noisy ear and tongue, but decide by reason.’7 Philosophical method can be understood as an instrument in this struggle, designed to free both the philosopher and his students from ingrained ways of thinking. Socrates’ questioning, Descartes’ doubt, Heidegger’s idiosyncratic vocabulary, as well as all the bizarre thought experiments invented by philosophers, are ingenious techniques deployed in the war on habit. However, we might wonder how philosophy would be possible without habit – without, for example, the learnt linguistic conventions that facilitate communication, and the physical habits of writing or typing which can become an indispensable condition of thought. On a more metaphysical note, Ravaisson argues that reflection on habit helps to overcome certain dualisms that are commonly thought to have plagued Western thought – between the mind and the body, between freedom and nature. (Even if this kind of dualism is not so deeply entrenched in our philosophical tradition as is often claimed, many philosophers seem to have got into a habit of complaining about it.)

This essay will look more closely at these diverging views of habit, and explore a fundamental ambivalence and ambiguity that underlies them. If the philosophical tradition
tends to divide itself on the question of habit, this is because of a duplicity within the matter itself. Habit is at once a blessing and a curse. In this respect it is akin to the Greek concept of the pharmakon, which is a drug that may be both a poison and a cure. Jacques Derrida has used this idea to explore the ambivalence of writing, but it is even more apt in the case of habit, whose comforting and anaesthetizing properties can bring it close to compulsion and addiction. Derrida’s definition of writing in his essay ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ can apply equally to habit: ‘to repeat without knowing.’

The most interesting philosophers of habit are those who recognize its duplicity. Hegel is particularly willing to acknowledge habit’s positive and negative aspects: ‘Habit is often spoken of disparagingly and called lifeless, casual and particular. And it is true that the form of habit, like any other, is open to anything we happen to put into it; and it is the habit of living which brings on death, or, if quite abstract, is death itself: and yet habit is indispensable for the existence of all intellectual life in the individual.’ On the question of freedom, Hegel argues that ‘the want of freedom in habit . . . strictly speaking arises only in the case of bad habits, or so far as habit is opposed by another purpose: whereas the habit of right and goodness is an embodiment of liberty.’ He also points out that ‘habit and familiarity’ are essential conditions of thinking, and thus of philosophy. It is often under the influence of Hegel that contemporary philosophers comment on the ambivalence of habit. However, Hegel is more concerned with analysing the concept of habit than with assessing its effects and implications in different spheres of life.

In the following chapters I will explore how the pharmakon of habit influences knowledge, ethics, religion, the practice of philosophy, and perhaps even nature itself. The European
philosophical tradition has yielded so much interesting writing on habit that simply compiling the most significant sources would be a worthwhile exercise – and to some extent I will attempt this here, and consider how these texts on habit reflect the broader history of philosophy. But this book is not primarily a history of habit: my concern is more to order the ideas of other thinkers in a way that sets out the dialectic which unfolds from reflection on habit itself. And elements of the interpretation of habit developed here may contribute something new to the discourse on habit that can be drawn from our philosophical tradition. One of these elements is the discovery of a double principle of habit – receptivity and resistance to change – a principle that operates ethically as well as ontologically. Another is the guiding metaphor for habit introduced later in this chapter, which connects its various meanings across different contexts. Perhaps most importantly, clarifying the distinction between habit and practice helps us to understand why attention has a transformative effect on habit in all the spheres of human life examined in this essay.

DEFINING HABIT

Many of Plato’s dialogues show that questions of the form ‘what is \( X \)?’ tend to lead not to a clear answer, but to the realization that concepts which we thought we understood are in fact complicated, slippery, and perhaps even impossible to define. In the case of habit there are additional difficulties: as Hegel puts it, ‘We are accustomed to the idea of habit; none the less to determine the Notion of habit is hard.’\(^{13}\) But it is important to ask the question ‘what is habit?’, if only to bring to light this concept’s particular complexity and elusiveness.
When we attempt to define habit a series of distinctions come into view. First, there is a distinction between idiosyncratic, individual habits and collective habits, or customs. These are linked, of course, by the fact that habit can be contagious: certain habits, like certain diseases, are passed around between beings who encounter one another. In the Republic Plato notes the connection between imitation (mimesis) and habit: ‘Have you never noticed how imitation, if long continued from an early age, becomes part of a person’s nature, turns into habits of body, speech and mind?’ Second, we can distinguish between active and passive habituation – that is to say, between acquiring the habit of acting in a certain way, and becoming accustomed to familiar sensations and experiences. This distinction between active and passive habit has led several thinkers, beginning with Joseph Butler, to identify a ‘double law’ of habit, which will be considered at some length in this essay. Third, habit can be either a source or a result of actions. We sometimes say that we act ‘out of habit’, implying that habit is a cause; but we can also recognize that habits are themselves brought into being through the repetition of an action or experience. Indeed, habit can be both the source and the result of action, so that it is self-perpetuating. Fourth, there is an important distinction between habit as an aptitude, skill or facility, and habit as a tendency or inclination. Driving a car or riding a bicycle may be entrenched habits in the sense that they are acquired through repetition and can be executed without much thought or attention, but this sort of habit is not usually compulsive, and may be changed with little effort. By contrast, habitual behaviours such as gestures and turns of phrase, nail-bitting and excessive consumption involve a tendency to act in a certain way, and can be very difficult to restrain.
John Locke and Thomas Reid both propose definitions of habit that bring together these last two points. In his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke states that habit is ‘the power or ability in Man, of doing any thing, when it has been acquired by frequent doing the same thing’, but he distinguishes this sense of habit from the idea of a ‘disposition’ – a form of habit that, like a coiled spring, is ‘forward, and ready upon every occasion to break into Action.’17 This distinction had not been recognized by Thomas Hobbes, who in 1655 defined habit as ‘motion made more easy and ready by custom; that is to say, by perpetual endeavour, or by iterated endeavours.’18 Ability, ease and readiness might be regarded as varying degrees of habit, but for Locke the difference between them is significant. He illustrates this by comparing two character traits: boldness, which is a ‘power’ to act or speak without fear; and ‘testiness’, which is an ‘aptness to be angry’. While boldness is simply an acquired capacity which can be drawn on when the occasion requires it, testiness is, as Locke puts it, ‘forward’, apparently having its own momentum to ‘break into Action’ without prior reflection or decision.19

The first edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, published in Edinburgh in 1771, equivocates between the two senses of habit distinguished by Locke. Here habit, considered as a philosophical term, is defined as ‘an aptitude or disposition either of mind or body, acquired by a frequent repetition of the same act.’20 Reid, however, argues that the difference between aptitude and disposition is philosophically significant. Writing in 1778, Reid – perhaps drawing on both Hobbes and Locke – acknowledges that ‘Habit is commonly defined, *A facility of doing a thing, having done it frequently,*’ but argues that ‘the habits which may, with propriety, be called “principles of action” must give more than a facility, they must give an
inclination or impulse to do the action; and that, in many cases, habits have this force, cannot be doubted.’21 Reid thinks that habits only have a causal force when they involve a tendency or ‘proneness’ to perform the action in question, so that some effort is needed not to act thus. This qualification, he notes, departs from the way habit has been understood within the Aristotelian tradition:

Aristotle makes wisdom, prudence, good sense, science and art, as well as the moral virtues and vices, to be habits. If he meant no more, by giving this name to all those intellectual and moral qualities, than that they are all strengthened and confirmed by repeated acts, this is undoubtedly true. I take the word in a less extensive sense when I consider habits as principles of action. I conceive it as a part of our constitution, that what we have been accustomed to do, we acquire, not only a facility, but a proneness to do so on like occasions; so that it requires a particular will and effort to forbear it, but to do it, requires very often no will at all. We are carried by habit as by a stream in swimming, if we make no resistance.22

The distinction highlighted by Reid perhaps underlies the contrasting evaluations of habit. If we regard habit as a skill or aptitude, then it appears quite harmless, and in many cases very helpful. But if, as Reid suggests, habit considered as a principle of action carries us along like the current of a stream, it has a force of its own that may well run counter to our rational decisions, and even to our desires. The examples of boldness and testiness offered by Locke do perhaps imply a normative distinction between habit as aptitude or skill, and habit as disposition or tendency – as if only bad habits have a
spontaneous, ‘forward’ quality that makes them difficult to restrain. But just as skills can be used for good or ill, so tendencies may be virtuous or vicious.

As well as evoking a series of distinctions, the attempt to define habit raises some difficult metaphysical and epistemological questions. A habit is not an easily identifiable physical object. Indeed, it is not at all clear what kind of thing a habit is. We may certainly infer the presence of a habit when we observe repeated actions or patterns of behaviour. But can we tell the difference, as onlookers, between actions that are habitual, and those that are occasional and context-dependent? Can we actually see another’s habit? We can perhaps gain a more immediate apprehension of habit in our own movements. This tends to happen as an exception rather than as a rule, for habits show themselves when they are disrupted. So, for example, you reach for your keys, or grope for the light switch – and before you’ve completed the movement you realize that it is redundant: you have given your keys to a guest who is waiting in for you; the light bulb still hasn’t been changed. In such circumstances, the force of habit can be caught in the act, and recognized as such. But even so, we are becoming aware of a single impulse that signals the presence of a habit, and not the habit itself.

In either of these cases – the third-person or the first-person inference of a habit – what we infer is, as Reid suggests, an underlying principle of action. This might be regarded as a disposition or a tendency, which, we believe, causes the action in question, so that we say that someone acts out of habit. But does this ‘disposition’ or ‘tendency’ continue to exist when the habit is not being exercised? How might it be detected? In what sense does a ‘path of least resistance’ exist, when it is not being taken? On this question, we might find recourse to
the metaphysical concepts of potentiality and actuality. A tendency to act is not a distinct, stable object, but it is not nothing either: it is a potentiality that is actualized whenever the habitual actions are performed. However, potentiality and actuality are relative terms. Relative to action, a tendency is something potential rather than actual. But it is also true to say that something may or may not have the potential to acquire a certain kind of habit – so that, for example, a young child has the potential to ride a bike and to do maths, but a kitten does not have this potential. In this respect, a habit that has been acquired is something actual, in relation to the mere potentiality to acquire it. So habit is an actuality in one sense, but a potentiality in another. Habitual tendencies may share something in common with what Gilles Deleuze calls ‘the virtual’, which is as real as actuality, as dynamic as potentiality, and as myriad and shifting as possibility. All this perhaps goes some way towards clarifying the kind of thing habit is, and the kind of being it has, but also seems to raise further questions.

Repetition is another source of philosophical difficulty, since it implies both identity and difference and thus raises the perennial question of how these elemental concepts are connected. Hume points out that habits develop when repetition ‘makes a difference’, and this seems puzzling because in ordinary discourse repetition implies a recurrence of the same. This familiar idea is, in turn, philosophically questionable: is anything really identical to anything else? And if anything remains identical through time, would it have to be disrupted in order to recur? In his enigmatic novella Repetition (1843) Søren Kierkegaard raises ‘the question of repetition – whether or not it is possible’: his narrator-pseudonym, Constantin Constantius, addresses this question experimentally
by trying to repeat a fondly remembered trip to Berlin, but this fails disastrously, and Constantin concludes that ‘repetition is too transcendent for me.’ More speculatively, however, he asserts that ‘if God himself had not willed repetition’ then the world would never have come into being, and that ‘the world continues because it is a repetition.’ This turns on its head the more intuitive idea that repetition is the iteration of something – of an established identity. Kierkegaard’s pseudonym suggests that, on the contrary, repetition constitutes the stable identity of something through time.

This obscure problematization of repetition is developed more systematically by Deleuze, who in *Difference and Repetition* (1962) argues that repetition is prior to identity or sameness, and not vice versa. This suggests that identity is produced by habit, making habit a force that generates something new, rather than the effect of an established identity that seeks to conserve itself. The idea that repetition makes differences as well as identities leaves us with the rather paradoxical thought that through its repetition an entity makes a difference to itself. And this possibility has an ethical significance as well as a metaphysical one. As I repeat myself, how do I make a difference to myself? As we repeat ourselves, how do we make a difference to the world? As the world repeats itself, does it make a difference to God?

Our concept of habit is further complicated by the use of this English word to translate different Greek and Latin terms. In Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, moral virtue is connected with both ethos and hexis. While ethos signifies character, custom, or way of life, a hexis is a disposition, capacity or tendency in the sense (or senses) outlined above. In Latin, consuetudo and habitus have similar meanings to ethos and hexis – and as we shall see in Chapter 3, some philosophers
have drawn a sharp distinction between them. However, both pairs of terms are often translated into English by ‘habit’.

These questions, distinctions and qualifications associated with the concept of habit indicate its complexity, and some of the points raised briefly here will be considered in more detail over the coming pages. We may not yet be able to say what habit is. Nevertheless, we all know how to use the word ‘habit’ – and reflection on this use offers another way to examine the concept of habit.

THE FORM OF NATURE

When we look at the various uses of the English word ‘habit’, we find a small family of concepts with a surprisingly large scope of reference. Understood as a settled tendency or disposition to behave in a particular way, ‘habit’ can be animal, vegetal or mineral. In mineralogy, ‘habit’ is a technical term for the way crystals are formed, and similarly in botany ‘habit’ describes the manner of a plant’s growth – whether it shoots upwards, climbs, or creeps along the ground, for example. When applied to an animal, ‘habit’ signifies a pattern of behaviour – its ways of finding shelter, hunting, storing food, resting, mating, and so on. Within the human sphere, the term can be extended to include more complex and sophisticated kinds of activity, such as psychological patterns of thought and desire. It can also, however, denote a purely outward, physical way of being: a bearing, a posture, a demeanour, a way of holding oneself. This kind of habit is both subtle and powerful: it is possible to recognize a casual acquaintance from a distance, and from behind, simply by her gait or the incline of her head. Habit has also been used to mean a uniform, or a standard mode of dress – a riding habit,
for example – although nowadays this usage tends to be confined to the robes worn by monks and nuns. The connection between habit and clothing is also apparent in the English words ‘custom’ and ‘costume’, and the French coutume and couture, which share a common root in consuetudo.

These uses have in common the idea of shape or form. A habit is a form that is distinctive to the individual in question, whether this is a rhododendron or a butterfly, a hedgehog or a horse rider. Several points arise from this basic observation. Habit can distinguish one group or species from another, or one individual from another. A habit of growth, amongst other features, distinguishes the rhododendron from the clematis, and similarly a habit of migration distinguishes one species of bird from another. But in the case of those organisms which have managed to flourish within and adapt to different environments, habits are more specific to breeds, tribes and communities. In the human sphere, of course, individuals even of the same family can have very different habits: here, habit is an effective way of distinguishing between two grey-haired, elderly, beige-coated neighbours as they shuffle or stride past one’s window.

It seems, then, that although the concept of habit applies to a very broad range of beings, habit itself develops in the case of more sophisticated and highly functioning animals. In humans, this development encompasses cultural forms of expression such as the use of language and complex signs, and highly specialized forms of activity – baking a cake, driving a bus, programming a computer, conducting a scientific experiment, or presenting an academic paper. But furthermore, habit in the human domain diversifies into addiction, routine, skill, idiosyncratic behaviour, collective custom, and even explicit social practice that is deliberately conserved and handed on
from one generation to the next. And, crucially, in human beings habit becomes reflective – that is to say, both an instrument and an object of reflection.

Habit lies at an indeterminate transition point between nature and culture within the human being. Humans share with plants the vegetal functions of growth, nutrition and generation; with simple animals the functions of breathing and digestion; and with more developed animals the functions of communication, social organization, and care and education of their young. And, of course, humans have their own distinctive forms of consciousness and expression which they pass on to one another.

The idea that human habit constitutes a transition from nature to culture is discussed by Hegel in his Philosophy of Spirit. In fact, habit appears at decisive points throughout Hegel’s philosophical system: in his Philosophy of Nature he takes up the analysis of habit presented by the young French biologist Xavier Bichat in his pioneering Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort; and in his Philosophy of Right Hegel considers the ethical and political significance of habit. In the Philosophy of Spirit, however, he embarks on a more technical analysis of habit, considered as a principle of human nature. In this text, habit is located in the passage from merely natural, organic life to a spiritual kind of existence – the emergence of a self. With habit comes a degree of freedom. On this point, Hegel echoes the insights of another French physiologist, Claude Perrault, who noted in 1680 that because habit ‘has the power to make easy the exercise of all [the body’s] internal functions’, it allows the soul ‘freedom to attend to those which are external’.28 But Hegel also finds that habit facilitates a relation of ownership to sensations and other features of our experience. Through habit, he writes, ‘the soul has the contents
[of its experience] in possession, and contains them in such a manner that in these features it is not sentient, nor does it stand in relationship with them as distinguishing itself from them, nor is it absorbed in them, but has them and moves in them, without feeling or consciousness of the fact.’

In *De natura deorum* Cicero writes that ‘we seek with our human hands to create a second nature in the natural world,’ and Hegel suggests that this concept of ‘second nature’ expresses an equivocation on the naturalness of habit:

Habit is rightly called a second nature; nature, because it is an immediate being of the soul; a second nature, because it is an immediacy created by the soul . . . In habit the human being’s mode of existence is ‘natural’, and for that reason not free; but still free, so far as the merely natural phase of feeling is by habit reduced to a mere being of his, and he is no longer involuntarily attracted or repelled by it, and so no longer interested, occupied or dependent with regard to it.

This contrasts with the Romantic idea that ‘nature’ has a spontaneity and a creative power that habit reduces to mechanical uniformity, rather as a child’s spontaneity is progressively curbed by the imposition of social custom and convention. From this Romantic perspective a ‘second nature’ appears to corrupt or constrict what is truly natural, whereas for Hegel it is the elevation and fulfilment of nature.

Underlying the various uses of the word ‘habit’, then, are hints about the significance of habit both throughout nature as a whole, and within human life. Habit might very broadly be defined as a particular way of being – that is to say, a distinctive form or style or posture of living. Habit is a
principle of nature, albeit one that pushes beyond the boundaries of the natural, and so tests the distinction between nature and culture or artifice. Habit can normalize the artificial, and make what is natural strange and uncomfortable. This is exemplified by the woman who is so used to wearing make-up that she feels unable to leave the house ‘without my face on’; similarly, our collective caffeine habit makes a day without tea or coffee seem unthinkable. Such modifications become a ‘second nature’ that allows us to function ‘as normal’, and in this respect they differ only in degree from the habit of a heroin addict who becomes ill when he is deprived of his drugs. Through habit, nature both forms and re-forms itself, lets itself be cultivated and constructed in a secondary way. But much more needs to be said about this conception of habit. Considered purely as a principle – that is to say, regardless of its scope and application, and the history of its use – what does habit consist in?

**CONSTANCY AND CHANGE**

The principle of habit involves both constancy and change. On the one hand, it is through habit that beings – whether human, animal, vegetal or mineral – hold their shape through time; they remain the same (or approximately the same) even in movement, for they repeatedly follow certain patterns and sequences. In this way, habit forms part of an individual’s stable identity – and it may even constitute this identity. On the other hand, we can acquire habits only because we are changed by our actions and experiences. Habits develop when a repeated change, such as a movement or a sensation, makes a difference to a being’s constitution. But, again, the changes that happen in habit acquisition produce an inclination to repeat,
strengthen a conservative force, deepen a tendency to stay the same. Habit does not just involve both constancy and change: it combines constancy and change.

Ravaissone emphasizes this point at the beginning of his 1838 essay *De l’habitude*. ‘Permanence and change are the first conditions of habit’, he writes here, and he goes on to describe the kind of change involved in the development of a habit:

Habit implies more than mere mutability; it does not simply imply mutability in something that remains without changing; it supposes a change in the disposition, in the potential, in the internal virtue of that in which the change occurs . . . From the lowest level of life, it seems that the continuity or repetition of a change modifies, relative to this change itself, the disposition of a being, and in this way modifies nature.33

Ravaissone illustrates this idea with an example taken from Aristotle’s *Eudemian Ethics*: a stone, however many times it is thrown into the air, will not acquire a habit of ascending.34 Stones are mutable – they can be corroded, split, or sculpted into different shapes – but, unlike living beings, they do not have a nature (or, as Ravaissone puts it, a disposition, potential or internal virtue) that can be modified.

Constancy and change are, then, the two basic aspects of habit. The etymology of habit seems to favour its invariable face: our English word can be traced to the Greek ekhein and the Latin habere, which both mean ‘to have’ and ‘to hold’. As we have seen, the idea of holding carries the sense of an enduring posture, a way of holding oneself, that brings together diverse uses and applications of the concept of habit.
And the bare notion of having can be developed into more sophisticated concepts of possession and ownership, which again convey a relationship that is stable and continuous through time. Our habitat, after all, is the place to which we belong, and in which we keep our belongings.

In fact, the privileging of constancy rather than change in the linguistic origins of the concept of habit is highly significant within the philosophical tradition. As with so many philosophical concepts, the Greek hexis (from ἐκχειν) – which became the Latin habitus (from habere) – came to birth in Aristotle’s work, although it was prefigured by a less precise and systematic treatment in Plato. In his Categories Aristotle defines hexis as an enduring quality, contrasting it with the term diathesis, which signifies a more ephemeral state. A hexis, for example, might be the hardness of stone, the brittleness of glass, or the courage of a soldier, while a diathesis might be a transient quality of coolness or fatigue. In his study of ethical life, where the concept of hexis becomes most productive, Aristotle emphasizes that moral virtue involves the cultivation of long-lasting character traits. ‘Having’ or ‘possessing’ certain virtues amounts to a stable identity, so that having a capacity or a tendency to act with, for example, generosity or wisdom, signifies that a person is generous or wise. And likewise, in the case of vices, one who frequently runs from challenging situations is a coward, and a habitual heavy drinker is an alcoholic. ‘One swallow does not make spring, nor one fine day’, remarks Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics; ‘Neither does one day or a short time make someone blessed and happy.’ In other words, the good life involves the sedimentation of actions, through repetition, into habits that come to constitute an abiding way of being.
Of course, the stable having and holding expressed in the concept of hexis need not be static. Habit’s constancy might rest on a pattern of growth or of movement – as in the case of botanical or animal habit. And it incorporates variations and alterations within its general pattern. In any particular case, resistance to change is itself an acquired tendency, since it resists in a particular way, according to a particular pattern of action and experience – and it therefore testifies to an underlying capacity to be changed and formed. Still, this hexis aspect of habit emphasizes that repetition is a conservative force that, secured by a fundamental inertia, produces consistency and identity. It is as if mere repetition of an action or encounter – however blind, accidental or meaningless – imposes a command, an order, a rule, which is assimilated by the organism and becomes its own internal order, its self-regulation. This rule of habit may well run counter to a rational or a moral order.

The other aspect of habit prioritizes a more radical kind of change. While habit’s conservative face expresses resistance to change, its open face expresses receptivity to change. As Aristotle’s example of the stone illustrates, only beings which have an impressionable nature are capable of contracting habits. Only in such beings can repetition generate – or erode – a disposition. Habit implies responsiveness to the environment. We might say that habit implies subjectivity, provided that this can be understood, very broadly, as signifying sensitivity without necessarily requiring consciousness, so that it encompasses plants and very simple organisms. Deleuze writes that ‘a soul must be attributed to the heart, to the muscles, nerves and cells, but a contemplative soul whose entire function is to contract a habit.’ Of course, the phenomenon of habit also shows us that we are receptive
to the changes incurred by our own actions and decisions. In habit we not only yield to external influence: we are inescapably receptive to ourselves, formed as the (often unintended) consequence of our movements.

Just as the resistance to change implicit in habit contains within it an element of flexibility and variation – and, as an acquired mode of resistance, testifies to our receptivity to change – so receptivity has its own limit. This points to the important distinction between plasticity and flexibility, fluidity or amorphousness.³⁹ If we were simply receptive to change, without limit, then we would be incapable of habit. Each new action or experience would transform us, so that we would have no character or integrity to call our own. We would be empty, entirely subject to circumstance, blown hither and thither by the winds of change. Neither absolute resistance nor absolute receptivity allow a thing to have a nature. The idea of plasticity, on the other hand, captures the twin conditions of habit in bringing together both resistance and receptivity to change. Materials that are plastic can hold their form as well as take on a new form.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century William James proposed an elegant definition of plasticity as ‘the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once.’ Insisting on the materiality of habit, James argues that ‘organic matter, especially nervous tissue, seems endowed with a very extraordinary degree of plasticity of this sort; so that we may without hesitation lay down [the principle] that the phenomena of habit in living beings are due to the plasticity of the organic materials of which their bodies are composed.’⁴⁰ In the 1930s the Canadian neurologist Donald Holding Hebb developed this insight through a series of experimental observations that called into question the
Pavlovian model of conditioning. Hebb argued that brain synapses are ‘plastic’, and a few years later Jerzy Konorski used the term ‘plasticity’ in a neurological context for the first time. These ideas have come to dominate mainstream science: Ann Graybiel’s summary of research on habit in neuroscience and psychology, published in 2008, emphasizes ‘experience-dependent plasticity’ and ‘dynamically changing activity patterns’ involving several different areas of the brain. Indeed, recent years have seen a proliferation of popular books announcing a revolution in brain science: the discovery of ‘the plastic mind’, or ‘the brain that changes itself’, is seen as heralding a new materialism that marks a radical break with mechanistic ways of understanding the brain as a fixed or ‘hard-wired’ system.

In fact, the neuroscientific concept of plasticity has much in common with far older concepts of disposition, habit and tendency, and even hexis itself. These philosophical concepts, particularly when they imply the metaphysical distinction between potentiality and actuality, already call into question mechanistic accounts of nature. (It would, after all, be silly to ascribe to a machine a disposition, habit or tendency to operate in a certain way.) So while contemporary accounts of the brain’s plasticity help us to understand the processes of habit formation, philosophical reflection on habit helps us to understand the significance of plasticity. As we shall see in the following chapters, philosophers have explored and argued about the influence of habit on intellectual inquiry, moral life, and religious belief and practice. These discussions illuminate the modern idea of plasticity, enabling us to approach it not just as a scientific concept, but as a principle with ontological, epistemological, ethical and political implications.
Various metaphors have been proposed for habit: an iron chain (Augustine), a schoolmistress (Montaigne), a curtain and a veil (Proust), a spiral (Ravaission), and a flowing stream (Reid). But reflection on the link between habit and plasticity draws attention to a particularly powerful metaphor: the pathway. This image brings together the two senses of habit distinguished by Locke and Reid – aptitude and tendency – for a pathway both facilitates a journey across rough terrain, and inclines us to take a particular route. Of course, we should not assume that a path is straight or linear. We shall see that certain philosophical reflections on habit suggest that its pathway is undulating, like the hills, or spiralling, like a coiled spring which repeatedly circles back upon itself to produce a forward momentum.

The constant and dynamic faces of habit are held together in the metaphor of a pathway. A pathway is both created and maintained by repeated movements – by sheep walking across moorland, for example. Yet pathways endure through the periods between these movements, although they will disappear if they fall out of use for too long. The formation of pathways also illustrates the idea that nature is modified (or, perhaps, modifies itself) through habit: the changes in a landscape mark a meeting point between what is natural and what is cultivated. And habit’s dual principle of receptivity and resistance to change is exemplified by the conditions under which paths are created by movements through the land. In his 2012 book on pathways and landscape, Robert Macfarlane observes that ‘the two main surfaces of the Western Isles – black peat and pale gneiss – are differently hostile to paths,’ for the spongy peat swallows paths while the tough gneiss
refuses them. This explains the practice of signing the way across such ground with cairns. Limestone, by contrast, is soft enough to be marked by raindrops yet resilient enough to hold these marks: ‘Humans and animals, seeking a route, are guided by the pre-configured habits of the terrain. These pedestrians create preferential pathways, which in turn attract the flow of subsequent pedestrians, all of which etch the track of their passage with their feet as they go. In this way the path of a raindrop hundreds of thousands of years ago may determine the route of a modern-day walker.’

Furthermore, the pathway metaphor indicates the broad scope of the concept of habit. It is not just that different sorts of beings – animals, vegetables and minerals – can acquire habits. Pathways run through the land, marking and guiding the movements of animals, but, according to the terminology of contemporary neuroscience, they also run between neurons in the brain. So habits can be both collective and individual phenomena. In both cases, pathways testify to plasticity: to resistance and receptivity to change, the dual principle of habit.

Philosophers intuited this principle long before the scientific discovery of the plastic mind. Where modern scientists speak of synapses (from the Greek sunapsis, meaning joint or connection), or neural pathways, early modern philosophers spoke of the pathways of ‘animal spirits’. In his Search after Truth (1674), Nicolas Malebranche argues that habits are formed through the connection of ‘traces’ within the brain: ‘it is enough that many traces were produced at the same time for them all to arise again together. This is because the animal spirits, finding the path of all the traces made at the same time half open, continue on them since it is easier for them to travel those paths than through other parts of the brain.’ Malebranche suggests that the development of pathways eases
the difficulties at first encountered in learning to speak a new language or play a musical instrument. He explains that pathways are opened and strengthened gradually, through repetition: 'little by little the animal spirits open and smooth these paths by their continual flow, so that in time they find no more resistance . . . when the spirits have passed through these traces many times, they enter there more easily than other places.'\(^47\) A generation later, Locke echoes Malebranche in hypothesizing that habits of thinking, willing and bodily movement 'all seem to be but Trains of Motions in the Animal Spirits, which once set a going continue on in the same steps they have been used to, which by often treading are worn into a smooth path, and the Motion in it becomes easy and as it were Natural.'\(^48\)

The pathway metaphor also conveys a sense of the temporality of habit. As Malebranche suggests, a path preserves traces of the activity by which it was formed. Each neural pathway, like a forest trail or a moorland track, is ‘an archive of past habits and practices’.\(^49\) Habit makes us historical beings – and in this respect it is very different from memory. If memory is an image of the past, habit is the past’s repetition in the present. Our habits are not souvenirs, but the living embodiment of our history.\(^50\) Habit is a forgetful appropriation and retention of the past: the dark, vibrant underside of memory.

Just as someone walking along a path can see the way ahead as well as the route already taken, so the temporality of habit reaches out towards the future as well as back into the past. Regarded simply as an ability or capacity, habit constitutes a potentiality to act in a certain way in the future. But considered as a tendency, habit is, as Locke observed, ‘forward’: it anticipates the future. Habits of association create an expectation that
future events will follow a similar course, while habits of action, as we have seen, have a momentum of their own that propels a person along her well-travelled path. Ravaisson, drawing on Hume’s analysis of habit, emphasizes this orientation to the future: an action that is repeated ‘becomes more of a tendency, an inclination that no longer awaits the commandments of the will but rather anticipates them.’ Habit’s anticipation of the future differs from imagination, just as its appropriation of the past differs from memory. Habit does not have to conjure an image of the future: we do not look forward to brushing our teeth in the evening, for we simply reach for the toothbrush when bedtime comes. Ravaisson describes this unreflective expectancy of habit as ‘obscure’: ‘Continuity or repetition brings about a sort of obscure activity that increasingly anticipates both the impression of external objects in sensibility, and the will in activity.’ Through habit, then, temporality is shaped in a distinctive way, in the sense that the past and the future become one’s own. Indeed, the ‘having’ of habit accomplishes an appropriation of time itself: while inert things like stones are simply in time, beings which are capable of habit have a life-time. As Ravaisson puts it, ‘every living being has its own path’.

The pathway, then, provides an enduring metaphor that reveals something about habit’s genesis, effects and significance. If life is routinely envisaged as a journey, the pathway symbolizes the ambivalence of habit. As the ‘great guide of human life’, the path of habit facilitates our progress, and also leaves us free to enjoy the view or engage in conversation while walking through difficult terrain. But the ease of following a pathway without thinking or knowing where we are going may not be entirely to our advantage. Reliance on a well-trodden route discourages exploration of less familiar places,
while an adventurous diversion may reward us with delightful new vistas – or it might lead to disaster.

THE DOUBLE LAW OF HABIT

There are many philosophical accounts and interpretations of habit, and some of them will be considered in detail in the chapters to follow. But one especially significant idea deserves to be examined here, since it is a development of the principle of habit. Ravaisson calls this ‘the double law of habit’, but it was first noted by Joseph Butler in his 1736 book The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature. As this title suggests, Butler – an Anglican bishop – proposes a naturalistic interpretation of religion, largely in response to Hobbes’s reductive, amoral naturalism. In his discussions of Christian morality Butler draws on Aristotle’s virtue ethics, which as we have seen involves the concept of hexis. However, Butler supplements the Aristotelian account of virtue with his own analysis of the distinction between active and passive habit.

Butler observes that repetition has contrasting effects on actions and movements on the one hand, and sensations and feelings on the other. ‘Passive habit loses in power by repetition, active gains’, he states. Butler was not the first person to point out that when we become accustomed to certain sensations we cease to notice them, or that repeated actions become easier and more assured. But he seems to have been the first philosopher to reflect on how these two phenomena come together. Since actions are often prompted or motivated by feelings and sensations, the active and passive aspects of habit combine to produce a more complicated effect:
From these two observations together; that practical [i.e. active] habits are formed and strengthened by repeated acts, and that passive impressions grow weaker by being repeated upon us; it must follow, that active habits may be gradually forming and strengthening, by a course of acting upon such and such motives and excitements, whilst these motives and excitements themselves are, by proportionable degrees, growing less sensible, i.e. are continually less and less sensibly felt, even as the active habits strengthen.55

These remarks on habit are offered within a discussion of ‘moral discipline and improvement’, and Butler’s illustrations of his point reflect this context: he discusses how frequent exposure to danger or to distress can go together with increasingly courageous or compassionate actions. We will return to Butler’s account of moral habit in Chapter 3, but what is important here is his development of the principle of habit in drawing attention to its dual effects.

Other eighteenth-century thinkers took up Butler’s basic insight, but recognized that it is not restricted to the sphere of ethical practice. In his Treatise of Human Nature (1739), Hume tries to explain the fact that ‘custom encreases all active habits, but diminishes passive.’56 He suggests that new actions or ideas resist and agitate the flow of ‘animal spirits’ through the body and mind, and that frequent repetition erodes this resistance, ‘produces a facility’, and allows the spirits to settle into an ‘orderly motion’.57 And Bichat, in his 1799 Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort, examines the dual effects of habit on judgement. Bichat finds that habit ‘acts in an inverse ratio’ upon feeling (le sentiment) and judgement, for ‘feeling is constantly blunted by [habit], whereas judgement on the
contrary owes to it its perfection. The more we look at an object, the less we are sensible of its painful or agreeable qualities and the better we judge all its attributes.'\textsuperscript{58} Bichat suggests that whenever a sensation arises the mind automatically compares it with previous sensations, and that it is the difference between one sensation and another that we feel. New and unfamiliar sensations are therefore intense, and occupy our attention, but this effect is lessened by frequent repetition: ‘every time we see an object, hear a sound, or taste a dish, etc., we find less difference between what we experience and what we have experienced . . . Every state of relative pleasure or pain is incessantly brought to a state of indifference by the influence of habit.’\textsuperscript{59} But as feeling weakens, the activity of judging improves. Bichat illustrates this with the example of a man walking through a meadow full of flowers of different kinds: at first he is ‘distracted’ and absorbed by the mixture of scents, but as habit lessens and eventually effaces this initial feeling he is able to distinguish the particular smells of each plant, and to make judgements about them. According to Bichat, then, the two influences of habit may seem to be contrary, but in fact one explains the other. The diminution of sensation makes judgement easier, and in this way habit achieves the ‘perfection of every act of animal life’.\textsuperscript{60}

The distinction between activity and passivity is central to the nineteenth-century essays on habit by Maine de Biran and Ravaission. Maine de Biran offers a clear statement of the two effects of habit: ‘sensation, continued or repeated, fades, is gradually obscured and ends by disappearing without leaving any trace. Repeated movement gradually becomes more precise, more prompt, and easier.’\textsuperscript{61} He disagrees with Bichat about the cause of these two effects, and he examines in much
greater detail how they combine when our movements and feelings come together. In making a movement, he points out, we are both active and passive: we decide to move, but we also *are moved*, and every movement requires an effort, which we apprehend as a sensation. In other words, we cannot move without feeling our movements happen in our own bodies. Maine de Biran argues that this meeting point between activity and passivity is the origin of self-consciousness. Ravaisson follows this analysis very closely, but he identifies the contrary effects described by Maine de Biran as a unified *‘double law of habit’*. Furthermore, he claims that this law can be explained by a single principle. According to Ravaisson, repetition weakens sensation and strengthens movement *‘in the same way, by one and the same cause’*: the gradual development of an unreflective *‘spontaneity’, ‘tendency’ or ‘desire’*.

Just as Hume broadens the application of Butler’s *‘double law’* from the moral domain to habit in general, so Ravaisson develops Maine de Biran’s analysis of habit within *la faculté de penser* by applying it to different domains – including moral and religious life, thus returning to Butler’s original insights. But what is especially interesting in Maine de Biran’s study is how his reflection on the double law of habit leads to an ambivalent evaluation of its influence. He remarks that habit is the *‘general cause of our progress on the one hand, of our blindness on the other. . . . It is to habit that we owe the facility, the precision, and the extreme rapidity of our movements and voluntary operations; but it is habit also which hides from us their nature and quantity.’*

An account of habit’s *pharmakon*-like duplicity thus developed during the century of discourse on habit stretching from Butler to Ravaisson, and from Britain to France.
sensations fade when they are repeated, familiarity can breed contempt – but it also brings comfort and ease. In habit, both pleasure and pain are reduced, and even brought to a point of neutrality. Because actions are strengthened by repetition, habit increases the efficiency and accuracy of our movements – but this same strengthening can be a problem when we want to change habits that have become deeply entrenched. And in human life, the combination of activity and passivity in the complex flow of experience, action, and interaction makes the duplicity of habit equally complex. This raises the question of whether it is possible to distil the liberating and therapeutic power of habit from its naturally duplicitous composition. Could we ever enjoy the benefits of this pharmakon without its damaging side effects?

NOTES

4 Proust, In Search of Lost Time, vol. 6: Time Regained, p. 82.


10 Ibid., p. 141 (§410).

11 Ibid.


13 Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind, p. 143 (§410, Zusatz).


21 Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh, 1788), p. 117 (III.i.3).
22 Ibid., pp. 118–19.
26 Ibid., p. 133.
27 For an extended discussion of this idea, see Catherine Pickstock, *Repetition and Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. ch. 3.
29 *Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind*, p. 140 (§410).
31 *Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind*, p. 141 (§410).


48 Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, p. 396 (II.xxxiii.6). This is in the chapter ‘Of the Association of Ideas’ added to the fourth edition of the *Essay* (1700).


50 Drawing on the ancient philosophical concepts of hexis and habitus, Edmund Husserl finds that as repeated actions become settled character traits, they become ‘latent’ or ‘sedimented’: ‘No apprehension is merely momentary and ephemeral . . . This lived experience itself, and the objective moment constituted in it, may become “forgotten”; but for all this, it in no way disappears without a trace; it has merely become latent. With regard to what has been constituted in it, it is a possession in the form of a habitus ready at any time to be awakened anew by an active association’. 

51 Ravaisson, Of Habit, p. 51.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., p. 29.
55 Ibid.
59 Ibid., pp. 36–37.
60 Ibid., p. 40.
61 Maine de Biran, The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking, p. 219.
62 Ravaisson, Of Habit, p. 37.
63 Ibid., p. 53.
65 Maine de Biran, The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking, pp. 49; 100–1.