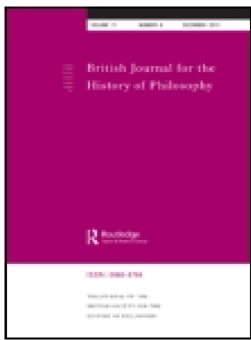

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# On Habit

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# BOOK REVIEWS

Clare Carlisle: *On Habit*. London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 150. $24.95 (pb). ISBN 9780415619141.

Clare Carlisle's *On Habit* is a rich and stimulating book on a topic that, despite having long been a key feature of western thinking, has drifted from the forefront of philosophical debate. This text serves as a timely reminder of the remarkably broad range of philosophical issues that reflection on habit covers. She shows not only that philosophy has an important role in our understanding of habit, but also that reflection on habit should shed much light on our understanding of knowledge acquisition, the nature of nature, and aid us in our individual quests to live the good life.

*On Habit* is part of Routledge's 'Thinking in Action' series, which attempts to 'take philosophy to its public'. 'Habit' is an excellent topic for this series; since, as Carlisle explains, it is ubiquitous, but this very ubiquity, its familiarity, its everyday nature means that even though our character is defined by the habits we have acquired, habit itself is, for the most part, hidden from view. The task of the philosopher is to make the role of habit explicit, that is, to make this very familiar aspect of our ordinary lives 'become visible, meaningful, and [a] cause for wonder' (2). Carlisle does an impressive job of presenting a wide range of broad philosophical issues, including very difficult epistemological and ontological problems, in a way that will be stimulating for both specialists and non-specialists alike.

The book is divided into four main chapters: (1) 'The Concept of Habit'; (2) 'Habit and Knowledge'; (3) 'Habit and the Good Life'; and, (4) 'Habit, Faith, and Grace'. Although it covers such a broad range of philosophical topics, there are at least three key themes that run through the whole book. Perhaps the most important is the aim to provide an interpretation of habit that accounts for its 'dual nature'. Habit has at once been understood as a 'curse' that dulls our senses and turns us into passive and unthinking beings, and as a 'blessing' responsible for allowing our freedom and creativity. The truth, Carlisle argues, is that habit is both, and the most interesting philosophy of habit has come from those thinkers who have recognized this. This leads to a discussion of what has become known as the 'double law' of habit, which, Carlisle convincingly shows, is a very productive philosophical insight. This law tells us that habit by repetition blunts the sensations we passively receive, but aids and facilitates the movements that we actively practice. It simultaneously blinds us to certain aspects of our experience, while making us more sensitive to others. Understanding how to best balance the effects of the double law is essential for living the good life and even for the sophisticated practice of philosophy

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itself. During this discussion Carlisle not only contributes to habit's philosophical history, but also reintroduces a number of crucial but forgotten figures from philosophy's history, such as Maine de Biran and Félix Ravaisson, and shows that their developments of this theory alone prove that this neglect is unjustified. Furthermore, if Carlisle's account is to be believed, in addition to productively developing this theory of the double law, Ravaisson even uses reflection on habit to overcome some of the most difficult issues in Kantian ethics. I am sceptical that he actually intended his work to do this, as Carlisle claims, but her interesting attempts to apply Ravaisson's theory to these problems show that his work is exciting and valuable. I have no doubt that her applications of Ravaisson's philosophy will convince many that it is worthy of further study.

A second key aim is to show that philosophy has a particularly interesting role with regard to understanding habit since, first, philosophical reflection on dispositions, tendencies, and habits necessarily suggests an anti-mechanistic picture of human mental life that anticipates the contemporary neuroscientific conception of 'plasticity'. And, second, such reflection allows us to reflect on plasticity's 'ontological, epistemological, ethical and political implications' (22). Carlisle provides a more convincing defence of the second part of this argument than the first. She dedicates whole chapters to philosophical discourse on plasticity's various implications, but, with regard to the first part, she simply claims that it would be 'silly' to attempt a mechanistic account of habit. The problem is further exacerbated when she discusses one of the book's key concepts – the pathway – and illustrates it using an example from Malebranche. The pathway is, as Carlisle suggests, a powerful metaphor for thinking about habit. A pathway inclines us to follow a certain route, treading through it reinforces it, it can be altered by frequent diversions from the previously formed route, and if neglected altogether, it will gradually disappear. Furthermore, it highlights the all-important balance between nature and cultivation that habit itself signals within the human being. The quotes borrowed from Malebranche are fascinating and illuminate a very interesting part of philosophical history. Nonetheless, they are troublesome for the anti-mechanistic argument Carlisle is trying to make, since Malebranche was actively trying to provide a mechanistic account of habit; one which could explain habit formation and activity according to strict causal law-like regularities. Animal spirits are, for Malebranche, simply very fine particles of matter and there is nothing anti-mechanistic about his account of neurophysiological pathway formation and its allowance of animal spirits to follow the path of least resistance from sense organs to the brain.

The book's third aim is to clarify the relationship and distinction between habit and practice, and to emphasize the importance of practice in the development of moral and intellectual virtues. At the end of the final chapter, Carlisle provides an interesting discussion of how religious practices encourage the development of habits that facilitate 'receptivity to the good' and resistance to negative influence: 'to resist the path of least resistance'

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(137). What is crucial about this is that they attempt to deal with habit's double nature by strengthening its positive side – creating spiritual pathways – while weakening its negative one. However, such practice is not just relevant for religious thought but also has a general applicability to ethical and philosophical practices. A pertinent example of this relationship that she could have used – one at the very core of modern philosophy – is Descartes's *Meditations*. His 'meditations' partially follow the method of the spiritual exercises he engaged with while attending Jesuit College. These spiritual exercises are used in his work to guide the reader away from the old 'bad' habits that she has acquired merely from being inhabited in a particular social environment, that is, they encourage resisting the path of least resistance. Concurrently, the discipline of these exercises encourages receptivity to a superior intellectual exercise that, with sufficient practice, will create 'spiritual pathways' enabling the practitioner to process long chains of reasoning in a single 'intuition' and consequently to be fully receptive and attentive to the good. Carlisle argues that this relationship between practice and habit shows, contrary to William James, who suggests our plasticity is a stage overcome in our thirties, that we are always receptive to the development of better intellectual habits, capacities, ideas, and virtues.

Carlisle has brought together a remarkable number of sources from habit's philosophical history and illustrated how it has anticipated issues at the centre of scientific discourse. However, she claims not to have aimed to write a history of habit but rather to 'order the ideas of other thinkers in a way that sets out the dialectic which unfolds from the reflection on habit itself' (6). One of the major virtues of this approach is that she has been able to situate some thinkers not traditionally thought of as philosophers very effectively within this dialogue. Her discussions of Proust, for example, are philosophically rich and compelling. Nonetheless, as a methodology, this approach is not entirely clear and there are some notable omissions. For example, a discussion of the pragmatists, and particularly Peirce's understanding of beliefs as habits, would have helped to bring the 'Habit and Knowledge' chapter into contact with contemporary debates in epistemology. The most contemporary philosopher discussed in depth is Gilles Deleuze; however, the discussions of Deleuze's thought tend to be too jargon-heavy for the intended audience. Although Carlisle certainly succeeds in showing that Deleuze has interesting things to say about habit, more could have been done to clarify difficult concepts such as 'the virtual'.

These relatively minor quibbles aside, what Carlisle does succeed in doing is to show quite clearly how much can be gained from meditating on the concept of habit through a dialectical engagement with many of the great minds in philosophy's history. The consequence of this is that it should convince many general readers of the practical significance of some of philosophy's most abstract ontological concerns, and of philosophy's importance more broadly. Moreover, it should show many specialists how many areas

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of philosophy reflection on habit relates to and informs, and just how important it is that we pursue it.

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Sébastien Charles and Plínio J. Smith (eds.): *Scepticism in the Eighteenth Century: Enlightenment, Lumiéres, Aufklärung*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2013, pp. xxvii + 381. £90 (hb). ISBN 9789400748095.

*Scepticism in the Eighteenth Century* consists of twenty-two articles preceded by a preface and an 'Introduction' by Sébastien Charles that amounts to a twenty-third article. The papers, including the 'Introduction' (xi), were either presented at or grew out of two conferences on 'Scepticism and the Enlightenment', one held at São Paulo in 2009, the other at Montreal in 2010 (xix). Of the twenty-three articles, all but five are in English; the rest are in French. Several of the papers, both English and French, are translations, some done well (e.g. Massimiliano Biscuso's 'Hegel on Scepticism and Irony'), others done badly (e.g. Luc Peterschmitt's 'The "Wise Pyrrhonism" of the Académie Royale Des Sciences of Paris').

As its subtitle suggests, the collection is an international affair. This is true of both the geography of its subject-matter and the composition of its contributors. Stylistic infelicities are not wholly unexpected, then. Yet a distracting number of grammatical and typographical errors appear even in papers that have not been translated and whose authors are writing in their native languages (e.g. Peter Kail's 'Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Moral Scepticisms'). This gives the collection an air of shoddiness that mars what is in fact a fine set of papers that represent important contributions to the ever-growing literature on scepticism's role in guiding and shaping modern philosophy.

The collection proposes to fill what the editors initially characterize as a century-shaped hole in this literature, which, they suggest, tends to leap from Bayle (1647–1706) to the post-Kantian scepticisms of Schulze (1761–1833), Jacobi (1743–1819), and others, with a pit stop only for Hume. We are told that 'the conjunction of scepticism and Enlightenment in the title of this volume might well seem surprising as much as it conflicts with the image of the eighteenth century we continue to hold', an image according to which there is a 'contradiction' between scepticism and '[t]he Age of Enlightenment', where the latter is understood as 'a dogmatic period' during which scepticism could be 'no more than an epiphenomenon' (v). It is suggested that we continue to hold this view at least in part because