MERLEAU-PONTY: ACTIONS, HABITS, AND SKILLED EXPERTISE

Merleau-Ponty offers an account of agency that centres on habit. He intends his view to tread a middle path between attempts to explain action in purely causal, mechanical terms ('Empiricist' views), and those that understand action as brute bodily movement, controlled by thought ('Intellectualist' accounts). He also takes his view to illustrate how the conceptual framework that gives rise to these positions is mistaken. Here, I will consider whether Merleau-Ponty manages to achieve these ends. However, I will do this by relating his views to contemporary thinking in the philosophy of action. I will begin by recasting the dialectic between Empiricist and Intellectualist accounts of action in contemporary terms, before presenting Merleau-Ponty's view of agency, locating it within this dialectic. I will then consider the charge that Merleau-Ponty's account collapses into Empiricism, and argue that this worry can be overcome by paying greater attention to a difference noted by Annas (2012) between habits and skills. A second objection will then be considered, which claims that the revised Merleau-Pontyian account collapses into Intellectualism. In response, I will further develop a Merleau-Pontyian view of agency that is immune to this worry. Finally, I will tentatively indicate ways in which this view challenges traditional thinking about action.

The dialectic between Empiricism, Intellectualism

Throughout his work, Merleau-Ponty sets his analyses of human subjectivity – including his account of agency – against those offered by Empiricism and Intellectualism. Empiricism attempts to explain agency in terms of cause and effect. Merleau-Ponty objects to this approach on the grounds that it reduces actions to events in the world that simply happen, leaving no room for the agent who *performs* the action. Intellectualism tries to remedy this lack by introducing a subject into the picture. However, the subject it introduces is a Cartesian self. Intellectualism thus takes action to be brute bodily movement that is controlled and guided by the agent's thoughts. Merleau-Ponty holds that Intellectualism fares slightly better than Empiricism since it at least tries to make room for the agent, but it must ultimately be rejected because it misconstrues the phenomena of human action.[1]

Contemporary readers will baulk at Merleau-Ponty's claim that no causal analysis of action is possible. A widely held view is that human subjectivity is part of the natural world, and so obeys the laws of causation. Moreover, a lot is now known about the physiological processes involved in action, and these processes are causal. Conversely, very few theorists now accept the notion of a Cartesian self. However, two ideas allow the dialectic between Empiricist and Intellectualist views of action to be recast in contemporary terms. First, it is common to distinguish between two different explanations of agency. Actions are performed by creatures *qua* creatures. When we say that someone performed a particular action, we mean that the person *herself* did something. But there are various mechanisms and processes that happen within the creature and underlie her performance of the action – things in which *she* has no hand. One sort of

[1] Empiricist and Intellectualist accounts of action are both committed to further claims that serve to define these positions, which I have omitted as they are not relevant to our purposes here. But for a fuller account, see Romdenh-Romluc (2010).

explanation refers to what goes on at the level of the creature herself – a 'personal level explanation'. Another explains the mechanisms that underlie agency – a 'subpersonal explanation'. Second, the majority of contemporary theorists take actions to be essentially brought about and guided by the agent's thoughts. According to such views, the same bodily movement can be either an action or a happening. The difference lies not in the bodily movement itself, but in whether it resulted (in the appropriate way) from the agent's thoughts.

With these ideas on the table, the dialectic between Empiricist and Intellectualist accounts of action can be recast in the following manner. Merleau-Ponty's complaint against the Empiricist can be understood as the objection that an analysis of action in terms of causal processes within the agent is subpersonal, and as such, it is an incomplete explanation of agency because it leaves out what is going on at the personal level. The dominant view of action makes some progress since it is a personal-level account. However, it is Intellectualist since it accounts for action as brute bodily movement guided by thought, and this misconstrues the nature of human agency. Merleau-Ponty aims to tread a middle path between these two views by giving a personal level account of agency but one that does justice to the phenomena, and so eschews an explanation that construes action as brute bodily movement controlled by thought.

Merleau-Ponty's account

Merleau-Ponty analyses action as bound up with perception. He holds that the world is perceived as 'soliciting' the perceiver to engage with it. The opportunities for action offered to a creature by her environment solicit her with varying degrees of urgency depending on how 'salient' they are for her. When I am hungry, food solicits me to eat it more strongly. If I am satiated, the 'pull' to eat is much weaker, and if I have overeaten, food may repel me entirely. Merleau-Ponty holds that these solicitations can initiate and guide action without the need for thought. Action is brought about by the most urgent solicitations.

Habit makes this possible. One acquires a habit by repeatedly doing the same thing over and over. Through this repeated activity, the body becomes familiar with the behaviour, so that engaging in it comes to feel like 'second nature'. In this way, one acquires a pattern of motor activity. The body's familiarity with the activity also manifests in perception of the relevant environment as soliciting the behaviour. Habits thus have both a motor and a perceptual component. Suppose, e.g., that I repeatedly cycle the same route to work each day. Through repetition of this behaviour, cycling to work along this route comes to feel familiar, and I come to see the world as soliciting me to engage in this behaviour. When I get up in the morning, my cycling helmet solicits me to put it on, my bike solicits me to ride it, my usual route solicits me to take it, and so on. I can respond to these solicitations without needing to think about what I am doing.

The way that the agent's habits enable her to perceive solicitations to act, and immediately respond by acting without thinking about what she is doing, forms the core of Merleau-Ponty's account of action, but does not exhaust it. I will return to this issue later.

Objection I

The first objection aims to show that Merleau-Ponty's analysis is not personal-level, but a subpersonal account of (one of) the mechanism(s) that underlies agency, and as such, his view collapses into Empiricism.

I will develop the objection by focusing on unintended habitual behaviour because, to assess whether or not Merleau-Ponty's account of agency is a personal-level analysis, we need to determine whether or not habits as he conceives them are a personal-level phenomenon. In order to do this, we need to isolate habits. Plausibly, unintended habitual behaviour is not guided by the agent's thoughts, and so can be considered the isolated exercise of habits.[2] If it can be shown that Merleau-Ponty's conception of unintended habitual behaviour construes it as personal-level, it will follow that his analysis of agency is likewise personal-level. Consider this case. I consciously decide to make a cup of tea for my friend containing no sugar. I become engrossed in conversation with him as I make the tea, and in my distracted state, add two spoonfuls of sugar – how I habitually make tea. As I add the second spoonful, I realise with annoyance, and make him another, sugarless, cup of tea. Merleau-Ponty's account can easily explain how such behaviour is produced. Once the agent has developed a habit, she can perceive the world as soliciting the relevant behaviour, and respond by engaging in it, without the need for thought. In the case described, I perceive the cup of tea as soliciting me to put sugar in it, and this perception draws forth my behaviour without the need for me to think about what I am doing.

Is this a personal-level analysis? There are different ways of drawing the personal/subpersonal distinction. In Romdenh-Romluc (2014), I appeal to three central understandings of it to try and show that Merleau-Ponty's account is personal-level. However, as I will argue below, there are grounds for thinking that neither of the first two conceptions picks out a feature (or set of features) possessed exclusively by personal phenomena. Thus, whilst the production of unintended habitual behaviour – as Merleau-Ponty envisages it – displays features possessed by personal-level phenomena according to these conceptions, this is insufficient to show that it is personal-level. The third conception *does* seem to provide a clearcut way of distinguishing between the personal and subpersonal, but – contrary to what I argued in Romdenh-Romluc (2014) – unintended habitual behaviour as Merleau-Ponty analyses it does not come out as a personal-level phenomenon according to this conception.

On the first conception, subpersonal explanations appeal to causal, mechanistic processes, whilst personal explanations do not (see, e.g., Dennett (1969), and Hornsby (2000)). Subpersonal explanations thus posit processes that are characterised by the sort of regularity that can be captured by causal laws. There is a question over what kind of regularity this is. Merleau-Ponty (2013) assumes that flexible responses to varying situations are *ir*regular and cannot be captured by causal laws. Habitual behaviour exhibits flexibility. Consider my daily tea-making. Some days, I will take a mug from the draining board. Other times, I will take one from the cupboard shelf. Sometimes there will be milk in the fridge.

[2] I argue for this claim in Romdenh-Romluc (2014). Space prevents me from rehearsing the argument here.

Other times, I will take and open a new carton from the cupboard. Merleau-Ponty's explanation of habitual actions accommodates this flexibility, because it does not require the agent's responses to her environment to be regular. Thus he seems to offer a personal explanation. However, his assumption that a mechanistic system cannot respond flexibly to a changing environment is now out-dated. Most theorists accept that causal mechanistic processes can exhibit a high degree of flexibility, so this argument is not compelling.

The second conception claims that the notion of meaning belongs to the personal level of explanation (see, e.g., Dennett (1969)). On Merleau-Ponty's account, the agent perceives her surroundings as soliciting action, and these solicitations are ordered in terms of their salience, so that the most salient draw her to act most strongly. The agent's actions – including her unintended habitual behaviour – are thus initiated and guided by the *meaning* her environment has for her. It therefore seems Merleau-Ponty's account is a personal analysis of action. However, it is not clear that the notion of meaning allows for a neat distinction between the personal and the subpersonal. Some of the processes conceived as subpersonal involve representations, e.g., the issuing of motor commands, which are representations specifying the performance of particular movements (see, e.g., Jeannerod and Pacherie (2004)). It is usual to think of a representation's content as a meaning (this does not commit one to the claim that *all* meaning involves representation). Thus the fact that the agent responds to the meaning her environment has for her is not sufficient to show that Merleau-Ponty's analysis is personal-level.

The third conception focuses more directly on the underlying thought that the personal level involves the agent *qua* agent, whilst the subpersonal does not. One might suppose that unintended habitual behaviour fits this definition. In the above case, one naturally says that *I* – the agent – made a cup of sugary tea for my friend. We do not say that some subsystem or part of me made it. However, this linguistic evidence is not compelling. Digesting food is a subpersonal process carried out by the agent's digestive system. Nevertheless, one might say of one's friend who is sitting on the sofa, 'Jolomie is just digesting his food before playing hockey'. One *says* that the agent *qua* agent, i.e., Jolomie, is digesting his food. But this should not be taken literally.

How should we understand what it is for something to involve the agent *qua* agent? There are different ways to cash this out. Here is one. The agent's conscious mental states – her perceptions, intentions, beliefs, desires, etc. – are paradigmatic personal-level phenomena. Something will involve the agent *qua* agent if it is integrated, in the right sort of way, with her conscious mental states. What it is for something to be so integrated is a difficult question. I am not able to give a general answer here. However, in the case of behaviour, it seems we can understand integration as follows. The agent is aware of the behaviour (it is integrated with her conscious perceptions); she has conscious control over it; it is in line with her conscious intentions, beliefs, desires, etc. (I take it there is likely to be some relation between these since it seems that to have conscious control over some behaviour, one must first be aware of it, and having conscious control means that the behaviour can be brought into line with one's conscious intentions, and so forth.)

The problem is that unintended habitual behaviour on Merleau-Ponty's analysis is *not* integrated with the agent's conscious mental states in the requisite way.

Unintended habitual behaviour is clearly not integrated with the agent's conscious beliefs, desires, intentions, etc. since it is unintended. But, one may suppose that since Merleau-Ponty takes unintended habitual behaviour to be brought about by the agent's perceptions, it is integrated with her conscious mental states, and so can be classed as personal level. However, whilst it is true that *conscious* perceptions are personal-level states, it is not obvious that this is the case for all perceptual or perception-like phenomena. Consider, e.g., blindsight. In this condition, damage to the primary visual cortex means that the subject has no visual awareness, yet is able to register the presence of certain objects within detectable range of her visual system (i.e., those located in her 'blind field'). Blindsight is a perception-like phenomenon insofar as it involves the visual system. But it is implausible to think that blindsight states are personal level. Intuitively, the unconscious detection of items in the blind field is not something *the perceiver* does, but is something carried out by subsystems within her. One may argue that the perceptual states that initiate and guide unintended habitual behaviour on Merleau-Ponty's account are likewise subpersonal. Whilst the agent must, on some level, detect her surroundings for the behaviour to occur, this seems to happen below the level of conscious awareness. Consider the above example. To add sugar to a mug, I must register its presence, the sugar, the spoon, and so on. But I do not seem to be *consciously* aware of these things when I make the tea. Indeed, once I become consciously aware of what I am doing, I stop doing it.

In response, one may note that conscious perception is not a uniform phenomenon. As Merleau-Ponty and others have pointed out, it has a figure-background structure. The figure – the focus of one's perceptual attention – is perceived clearly and in detail. The rest of the perceptual scene forms the background against which the figure is seen. It is perceived less distinctly. One can be aware of items as vague presences, without being aware of them as particular sorts of things. Since both focal and background forms of awareness are part of conscious perception, both belong to the personal level. One might then argue that the agent has background awareness of her environment when she engages in unintended habitual behaviour, and so the perceptual states that bring it about are personal level.

However, for this suggestion to be correct, the agent must have background awareness of those elements of her surroundings that release her unintended habitual behaviour – she must see them indistinctly 'out of the corner of her eye' – whilst focusing on another part of her visual field – the figure. But this description does not fit the cases concerned. Consider the above example. I must register the sugar, mug, spoon, as determinate items of certain sorts – rather than having indistinct experience of them – in order for them to guide my actions. I cannot use the spoon for putting sugar in tea if I only register it as a vague presence. I must register it as a spoon in order to use it for this purpose. Alone, this point is inconclusive, since background awareness can still present one with determinate items – one's experience of them will just be less clear and

distinct than those presented as the figure. More significantly, in the example, there is no figure on which my perceptual attention is focused, and against which the sugar, mug, spoon, and so on are perceived as background. Indeed, I am looking directly at the sugar, mug, and spoon as I make the tea rather than seeing them 'out of the corner of my eye'. It follows that unintended habitual behaviour does not seem to be guided by the agent's *conscious* perceptions, and so is not integrated with her conscious mental states on this basis.

The third way in which some behaviour may be integrated with the agent's conscious mental states is if she has conscious control over it. One may initially suppose I do have conscious control over at least some of my unintended habitual behaviour. In the example above, once I notice that I am putting sugar in the tea, I can stop doing it. I can directly intervene in the behaviour through an act of conscious will. However, it is true that in the case described, I intervene to stop the unintended habitual behaviour once I become aware of what I am doing, and so at this point, I have conscious control over it. But before this – whilst the behaviour is occurring – it is not clear that it is under my conscious control. I am not even aware of what I am doing, so it is surely incorrect to claim I have conscious control over my behaviour.

In summary, it appears that unintended habitual behaviour, as Merleau-Ponty construes it, is not a personal-level phenomenon. Thus, Merleau-Ponty may be right in claiming that habits play a central role in human agency, but this role is as part of the mechanism that underlies action. It follows that his account of agency, which places habits at its centre, is not an account of agency *per se*, but an account of its subpersonal underpinnings. His view thus collapses into the Empiricist position he wishes to avoid.

Response: skills versus habits

Annas (2012) draws a distinction between mere habit and skill or practical expertise that provides the resources for a Merleau-Pontyian response.

Habits and skills are alike in that both involve 'habituation', whereby the repeated engagement in some behaviour results in one's performance of it becoming familiar, fluid, easy (relative to one's first attempts to do the thing in question), and requiring less input from conscious thought. However, Annas points out, there are also important differences between habit and skill.

The most important difference in the current context is a striking contrast between the phenomenology of exercising a habit and exercising a skill. As we have seen, habitual behaviour can occur without the *agent* being aware of what she is doing. In other words, habits can be exercised absentmindedly. Moreover, when a habit is exercised in this way, it is not integrated with the agent's conscious mental states. Thus habits – so objection I goes – are best thought of as belonging to the subpersonal level. In contrast, skills can be exercised 'in flow' – a phenomenon studied extensively by Csikszentmihalyi (see, e.g., Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 1990). Flow is a heightened state of awareness where the agent's attention is fully focused on the activity. It is also characterised by the fact that the agent engages in the activity fluidly, and finds it enjoyable. The exercise of skills in flow is integrated with the agent's conscious mental states. She is aware of what she is doing; the skilled behaviour is typically in line with her conscious intentions,

desires, and so on; and it is under the agent's conscious control. The exercise of skills in flow is thus a personal level phenomenon.

The fact that skills involve habituation means that their exercise can be easily accommodated on Merleau-Ponty's account. Skills are acquired through practice, which is the body's familiarising itself with the behaviour. Through practising, one acquires the ability to engage in a pattern of motor activity, and see relevant parts of the world as soliciting one to engage in it. These perceived solicitations can guide the agent's behaviour without the need for thought. Moreover, since the exercise of skills should be classed as personal-level, if Merleau-Ponty puts skills rather than habits at the centre of his account of agency, his view will not be vulnerable to objection I. There is reason to take this line. Although Merleau-Ponty talks of motor *habits*, it seems from the examples he presents – e.g., playing football (Merleau-Ponty 1963), and playing the church organ (Merleau-Ponty 2013) – he is more interested in skills. Both of these activities usually require the agent to pay attention, and they are apt to produce a state of flow. Moreover, Dreyfus, who has pioneered work on Merleau-Ponty's account of action, takes motor skills to be at the heart of his view, rather than what we ordinarily call habits (see, e.g., Dreyfus 2000, 2002, 2005). Indeed, Dreyfus often emphasises the experience of flow in expounding Merleau-Ponty's views. The distinction between habits and skills thus seems to offer a way for Merleau-Ponty to respond to objection I.

Objection II

However, there is now a further problem. Objection II is the charge that the revised version of Merleau-Ponty's account collapses into the Intellectualist position that he wishes to avoid because skilled behaviour is essentially guided by the agent's conscious thoughts. I will develop objection II by drawing on Annas' (2012) characterisation of the difference between skills and habits.

Annas contends that skills are flexible and dynamic in a way that habits are not. Skills are flexible because they can be exercised in a range of different situations. Consider playing the piano. One can play a variety of different pieces (someone who could only play one tune would not be considered a skilled pianist), and in a variety of different contexts – on an upright piano at a friend's house, on a grand piano in a concert hall, on an electric keyboard in a pub, etc. Contrast this with my habit of putting two sugars in my tea, which is only exercised in one context: tea-making. Annas argues that this flexibility means that there is far more scope for improving one's skills than there is for improving one's habits. To some extent, I can improve my tea-making – the more I practise, the defter I become at putting the tea bag in the mug, pouring the water in, etc. But I very quickly reach a plateau where I can improve no further. Playing the piano, in contrast, allows for a far larger degree of improvement. There are an almost infinite number of new pieces I can learn to play; each piece can be played in different ways; etc. Skills are thus dynamic: they change and develop over time as the agent hones them.

Annas then argues that the flexibility inherent to skills requires a sort of understanding on the part of the agent, which can be considered essential to the skill. One has to learn a skill in a particular context, or range of contexts – those in

which the skill is demonstrated (if one has learnt partly through watching someone else), and in which one practises. In order to exercise one's skill in new contexts, one must distinguish between essential and contingent features of its exercise in the contexts where it is demonstrated/practised. Annas takes this to mean that one must understand, for any component of a skill, *why* one does – or should do – it. To cook pasta, e.g., one must know one heats the water to boil it, which allows one to distinguish between essential features of a pasta-cooking situation (the water is boiling) from contingent features (the water has been heated for ten minutes). In contrast, Annas argues that possessing a habit does not involve understanding which components are essential and which are incidental. To develop the habit of tying one's shoelaces, e.g., one need not distinguish between essential and contingent features of the situation in which one has developed this habit. As long as one's shoes get tied, one's habit can incorporate all sorts of idiosyncrasies (Annas 2012: 104). Annas then claims that the agent can articulate the sort of understanding that is essential to skills. She points out that if someone cannot explain why they are doing something, we are justified in doubting their expertise – e.g., we can legitimately doubt that someone is skilled at cooking pasta if they cannot say why they have heated the water for ten minutes rather than five. It seems plausible to suppose that if someone can articulate her understanding, she must have it before her mind. In other words, she must be consciously thinking about it. The upshot for Annas is that exercising a skill is an essentially thought-governed activity. She writes, 'my [piano] playing is constantly informed by and sensitive to my thinking' (2012: 102).

If Annas is right about the difference between skills and habits, then by putting skills at the heart of his account, Merleau-Ponty must hold that action is brute bodily movement guided by thought. His account thus collapses into the Intellectualist position he wishes to avoid.

Merleau-Ponty and thought-guided action

Objection II appeals to Annas' analysis of skilled behaviour as essentially driven by conscious thought. The problem is that this does not fit the phenomenology. As Annas points out, skilled activity lends itself to the experience of 'flow', where the agent's attention is absorbed in the task at hand, and her engagement in the activity is fluid. It is well-documented that consciously thinking about what one is doing disrupts the experience of flow. Here is cricketer Ken Barrington describing the phenomenon:

> *Everything* went wrong with my batting…When you're playing well you don't think about *anything* and run-making comes naturally. When you're out of form you're conscious of needing to do things right, so you have to think first and act second. To make runs under those conditions is might difficult (Barrington 1968: 97f).

An account of skilled behaviour as guided by the agent's conscious thoughts is thus implausible.

Annas is aware of the way in which thinking interrupts flow and tries to accommodate it by claiming that the thoughts that drive skilled activity 'efface' themselves in the expert's performance, but do not entirely 'evaporate' because they are 'recoverable', as shown by the fact that the expert can always describe

what she is doing (2012: 110—111). However, she offers no explanation of what it means to say that the thoughts 'efface' themselves, and so her proposal remains mysterious. Perhaps she simply means that the thoughts are *un*conscious. (In fact, Annas does not explicitly claim that it is the agent's *conscious* thoughts that drive her skilled behaviour, although, as noted above, this seems to be implied by her claim that the agent can always articulate her understanding of what she is doing.) The claim that the thoughts that guide skilled behaviour are unconscious does seem to remove the conflict with the phenomenology of flow. Although the sense in which they are 'recoverable' when they are unconscious still stands in need of explanation.

However, there is a further problem. Nothing in the account of skilled behaviour as guided by thought properly accommodates the crucial role played by habituation. We thus have grounds for seeking a better alternative to the Intellectualist account of skilled behaviour.

The situation is this: (at least some sorts of) skilled activities have the three characteristics identified above. They involve knowledge of *why* one does things thus-and-so, which can be articulated; they involve habituation; and they give rise to flow experience. A satisfactory analysis of skilled behaviour must account for these features. Merleau-Ponty's framework provides such an account.

We have already seen how he accounts for habituation. The body familiarises itself with the relevant activity through practice. In so doing, the agent acquires the capacity to engage in a pattern of motor activity, and to see appropriate parts of the world as soliciting her to engage in it. The control and guidance of her behaviour can then be given over to these solicitations, obviating the need for conscious thought.

Turning to the knowledge involved in skilled behaviour, it seems that Annas is right to connect this with thought. However, as we have seen, it is implausible to suppose that skilled behaviour is guided by conscious thought. Moreover, however we understand thought's role in action, it needs to be compatible with the fact that skilled behaviour involves habituation. Merleau-Ponty does not address thought's role in action in any detail. However, I have proposed the following development of his framework, which provides the required account (Romdenh-Romluc 2012, 2014). Merleau-Ponty's basic insight is that actions are drawn forth and guided by the agent's apprehension of her environment. The most fundamental means of apprehending one's surroundings is perceptual. The agent perceives the world as soliciting her to perform various actions. These perceived solicitations then draw forth her behaviour. Thought can play a role in action on this view by affecting the agent's apprehension of her environment. There are two central ways that it might do this.

First, we saw above that the agent is solicited by the opportunities for action afforded by her environment with varying degrees of urgency. The most urgent solicitations will be those that control her actions. The urgency of solicitations varies with their salience, so that those that are most salient for the agent will solicit her most strongly. When it's time for my dog's morning walk, e.g., opportunities for action relevant to this task become salient for me, and exert a stronger pull on me than when it's teatime. I may still perceive tea-making equipment as soliciting me to make tea, but my dog's lead will strongly draw me

to fetch it from the hook and attach it to his collar, his tennis ball will urgently invite me to put it in my bag, and so on. Thought can affect the agent's apprehension of her environment by affecting the salience of the opportunities for action it offers to her. My desire for cake, e.g., will make cake-eating opportunities salient for me; my intention to now knit some gloves for my friend will mean that knitting opportunities solicit me more strongly than dog-walking opportunities. Since the agent's actions will be drawn forth by the opportunities for action that solicit her most strongly, where these are made salient by the agent's thoughts, the latter play a role in bringing about action.

The second way in which thought may affect the agent's apprehension of her environment is by building in more opportunities for action than those she actually perceives. The agent conceptually represents an invitation, or requirement, to act. These conceptual representations add further opportunities for action to the agent's environment, over and above those that she perceives. The conceptually represented invitations to act function like perceived solicitations, drawing forth and guiding the agent's behaviour. Thus where an agent conceptually represents requirements for action, her activity will be guided by a composite apprehension of her environment – perceived and conceptually represented requirements for action. A group of actors rehearsing a play, e.g., know that when the set is built, there will be a wall at a certain location in the rehearsal space. They cannot *perceive* the wall as a boundary requiring them to stop, because there *is* no wall. Instead, the actors represent the spatial boundary in thought; they imagine that there is a boundary at a specific location, restricting their movements to one portion of the space. The conceptually represented requirement functions in tandem with the perceived solicitations – the perception of the stage edge as requiring them to stay away from it; the perception of the other actors as requiring certain actions, etc. – to guide the actors' behaviour.

Thought may guide the acquisition and exercise of skills in the two ways outlined. First, it may make skill-relevant opportunities to act salient, so that they solicit the agent more urgently. My intention to practise the piano, e.g., makes the piano's invitation to play it salient for me, so that it strongly draws me to do so. Once I have formed the intention, I don't need to have it constantly before my mind in order for it to guide my activity – I just need to pay attention to what I am doing. I will say more about this below.

Second, thought may contribute to the acquisition or exercise of a skill by adding requirements for action to the agent's apprehended environment, over and above those she perceives. It is this aspect of the Merleau-Pontyian framework that is key to accommodating the puzzling features of skill exercise and acquisition identified above. Consider a typical case of skill acquisition. The agent only comes to perceive the world as inviting her to act once she has acquired the skill. Thus her first attempts to acquire a skill cannot be entirely guided by *perception* of what to do. In many cases, it will be the agent's thoughts that guide her actions instead.[3] The agent conceptually represents a requirement for action, and it – along with the solicitations she perceives – draws forth and guides her activity. The buttons on a Cajun accordion, e.g., each produce two

[3] The agent may also learn by copying someone else. Thought need not be involved in this process.

different notes depending on whether they are pressed when the bellows are drawn out or pushed in. When one first learns to play, one *perceives* the buttons as for-pressing and the bellows as for-pushing-and-pulling, but one has to *think* about which notes are produced. The learner conceptually represents a certain button as producing 'E' on an inward push of the bellows and 'G' when they are pulled outwards. These conceptually represented requirements help guide her behaviour. As the agent continues practising, she will – in most cases – come to perceive the opportunities for action that she initially represented in thought. Once this happens, perception of the world as soliciting the appropriate actions can take over from thought in guiding action.

In this way, the knowledge that Annas identifies as essential to a skill becomes 'embedded' in the agent's perception of the situation. There is thus a sense in which it can be said to guide the agent's exercise of the skill, but not through the agent's consciously entertaining the knowledge in thought at the time she acts. Her knowledge guides her activity by shaping the perceptual situation that controls the exercise of her skill. Annas' claim that the thoughts involved 'efface' themselves can be understood along these lines. The agent's knowledge will be 'recoverable' insofar as there is no reason why she should forget what she knows, even when she no longer needs to consciously entertain it in thought in order to exercise her skill. She will thus be able to explain what she is doing if asked.

The final characteristic of skilled behaviour that needs to be explained is the fact that it is apt to induce flow experience. It is not possible to address this issue in full here, so I will focus on one aspect of flow experience that is significant in the present context: the fact that it involves 'intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment' (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 90). In other words, attention is required for flow. Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi take this to explain why the exercise of skills is apt to induce flow. '*Staying in flow* requires that attention be held by this limited stimulus field [i.e., what one is currently doing]' (2002: 92). Paying attention, for the average untrained human[4], requires the agent to focus but it also requires the agent's object of attention to be sufficiently interesting to maintain this focus. Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi link this to the agent's perception of the challenges posed by the activity: if it is not sufficiently challenging, the agent's attention will drift. The challenges must stretch the agent, without being too difficult, since this typically leads to frustration rather than fluid engagement in flow. Skills tend to satisfy this criterion because they are flexible and can be developed, thus presenting the agent with new challenges as her skill progresses.

The Merleau-Pontyian framework can accommodate these points, but it also allows us to say more about this. The agent is attentive in many cases of skill exercise, not just because the situation offers interesting features that capture her attention, but also because the skill cannot be exercised properly without the agent paying attention. In such cases, attention plays a crucial role in bringing about or enabling the agent's behaviour. In Romdenh-Romluc (2014), I develop

[4] It is well-known that one's capacity to pay attention can be honed. Certain meditational techniques are designed to do just this.

the basic Merleau-Pontyian framework to analyse the role that attention plays. On Merleau-Ponty's account, opportunities for action are made salient by various different factors. These are often competing – my desire to walk my dog makes dog-walking opportunities stand out, whilst my plan to finish this paper makes writing opportunities salient. Action is guided by the most salient affordances, but this does not mean that others completely stop 'pulling' the agent to act. To act effectively, one needs some way to reduce the 'pull' of interfering factors, so that one can get on with what one is trying to do. Attention plays this role. We can think of attentiveness as single-mindedness. To pay attention to what one is doing is to 'centre oneself in one's activity', increasing one's attunement to those possibilities for action that are relevant to it, so that they stand out for one more strongly. Attentiveness decreases one's attunement to those competing possibilities. In this way, paying attention to what one is doing helps to keep one's activity on track.

When a skilled agent exercises her skill, her activity is at least partly guided by her perception of the world as requiring certain actions: she perceives what to do. For Merleau-Ponty – as we saw above – the ability to perceive opportunities to exercise a skill is developed through practice. The more one engages in an activity, the more vividly opportunities to do so will show up for one. We saw earlier in our discussion of habits, that repetition can result in the ability to perform habitual actions without any input from, or effort on the part of, the conscious agent, i.e., absentmindedly. Perception of the corresponding affordances can likewise become automatic, so that they are registered by processes within the agent and guide her behaviour, without the agent herself being conscious of them. Indeed, this seems to be so when the agent acts absentmindedly. Perception of relevant action-opportunities becomes automatic through repetition. As we have seen, skills are flexible and can be exercised in different ways in a range of different situations. Thus whilst practising a skill develops one's ability to perceive how to exercise it, generally speaking, one does not practise it in sufficiently similar circumstances for the perception of skill-relevant opportunities to become automatic. The agent will need to *consciously* perceive in order to exercise her skill effectively. She will need to put her conscious awareness in her perception of the scene, as it were; in other words, she will need to pay attention to what she is doing. Paying attention will enable her to discern the relevant affordances so that they can guide her activity.

Return to the dialectic: some tentative suggestions

The discussion so far has shown that Merleau-Ponty provides the resources to develop an account of agency that satisfies his aim of avoiding both Empiricism and Intellectualism. In contemporary terms, this means that the Merleau-Pontyian account is a personal-level analysis of agency, rather than a theory about the mechanisms that underlie action, and one that avoids analysing action as brute bodily movement guided by thought. I now want to tentatively indicate how the account developed here fulfils Merleau-Ponty's second aim of revealing the inadequacy of the conceptual framework that underlies both Empiricism and Intellectualism. I will argue that it does this insofar as it raises problems with the personal-subpersonal distinction as it applies to at least some of the phenomena

associated with human agency, and shows that we need a more nuanced way of conceptualising action than the traditional division between actions and happenings.

Consider again the difference that Annas identifies between absentmindedness and flow experience. She takes this difference in phenomenology to map onto the distinction between habits and skills. However, this is incorrect. Some capacities that should be clearly classed as skills can be exercised absentmindedly. A skilled pianist, e.g., deep in conversation, standing next to a piano, might unthinkingly play a little tune with one hand. Whilst it does not seem that the pianist can be completely unaware of doing this in the same way that it seems an agent may be completely unaware of locking her front door as she leaves the house (in the latter case, the agent may have no memory of locking the door, but the pianist will surely remember playing the piano), the pianist's playing can be detached from her intentions in the same sort of way as my unintended tea-sugaring. She may know there is an exam happening in the room next to the piano, intend to not disturb the candidates, and be annoyed with herself when she plays the tune. Conversely, habits can be exercised in flow. What matters is that the agent finds sufficient interest in the activity for it to sustain her attention, and whilst the nature of the activity is likely to determine how interesting it is for the agent to some degree, finding something interesting is a subjective matter. It follows that some agents can be sufficiently interested in routine activities that others find humdrum – including habitual behaviours – for these activities to induce flow.

> Sports games, and other *flow activities* provide goal and feedback structures that make flow more likely. A given individual can find flow in almost any activity, however – working a cash register, ironing clothes, driving a car. Similarly, under certain conditions and depending on an individual's history with the activity, almost any pursuit – a museum visit, a round of golf, a game of chess – can bore or create anxiety [experiences that disrupt or block flow]. *It is the subjective challenges and subjective skills, not objective ones, that influence the quality of a person's experience* (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 91, their italics).

Moreover, interest in something can, to a certain extent, be cultivated. (Indeed, a portion of Csikszentmihalyi's research focuses on how to do this to harness the properties of flow experience to enhance engagement in learning activities.) It is plausible to suppose that the same agent might exercise a skill or habit absentmindedly on one occasion, and in flow on another, depending on how she is feeling at the time. Since the difference between absentmindedness and flow does not map onto the distinction between habits and skills, it does not show that habits belong to the subpersonal realm whilst skills are personal level phenomena.

What, then, does this difference tell us? Here is one suggestion. Human agents possess various different capacities that play a role in their behaviour, and which encompass what are called 'habits' and 'skills'. Those capacities can be exercised in ways that are more or less integrated with what we tend to think of as the agent *qua* agent, where integration is understood along the lines suggested above. The means by which integration is achieved (at least to some degree) is attention because to attend to what one is doing is to be aware of it; it

brings it under some degree of conscious control; and so allows the activity to be exercised in a way that is consonant with the agent's conscious mental states. There is a question concerning the extent to which integration is possible for any given capacity – for some, it may only be possible to achieve partial integration, for others it may be impossible to achieve any integration at all. Obsessive-compulsive behaviour, e.g., seems to share some characteristics with habit. It consists in actions that are repeatedly performed in particular situations, such as checking the gas is turned off several times before leaving the house. It is plausible to suppose that the agent's behaviour in such a case is called forth by her perception of her surroundings as inviting her to perform such actions. However, whilst the agent can pay attention to such obsessive-compulsive behaviours, doing so does not bring them under full conscious control, and they are not consonant with the agent's conscious desires, intentions, and so on. There may be other capacities whose exercise is *necessarily* integrated with the agent *qua* agent. Certain sorts of skills, e.g., may be such that they can only be exercised if the agent is paying attention and has conscious control over her activity. In such a case, the skill will only be exercised in a way that is consonant with the agent's conscious mental states. Perhaps brain surgery is one such skill.

These brief comments are far from conclusive, and merely indicate matters for further research. But if something like this view is correct, then it follows that the personal-subpersonal distinction may not apply in any straightforward way to some of the capacities associated with human agency. Moreover, it implies a more nuanced account of action, since intuitively, those behaviours where there is a high degree of integration look more like what are traditionally thought of as actions – behaviour over which the agent has control and for which she can be held accountable – and those where there is no, or very little integration look more like mere happenings. But since integration admits of degrees, there will be a spectrum of behaviour that cannot be readily classified according to the traditional dichotomy between actions and happenings. The Merleau-Pontyian account I have developed here thus shows that traditional ways in which we think about action require revision.

Conclusion

Merleau-Ponty intends his account of agency to both tread a middle path between Empiricism and Intellectualism, and to show how the dialectic between these views is misguided, such that we require a new framework for thinking about human action. In this paper, I have shown how this dialectic can be recast in contemporary terms so that Merleau-Ponty's goal is to provide a personal level analysis of agency (rather than a subpersonal accounts of the mechanisms that underlie it), which does not end up explaining action as brute bodily movement guided by thought. I have also used the resources Merleau-Ponty gives us to develop an account that satisfies these desiderata. On this view, actions are initiated and guided by the agent's apprehension of her environment, which incorporates both perceptions and thoughts. I then indicated how this account brings our traditional ways of thinking about action into question: it is not clear that the personal-subpersonal distinction applies in any straightforward way to a range of capacities involved in human action; this implies a more nuanced account

of human agency than that found in the current literature, which neatly divides human behaviour into actions and happenings.

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