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Between Freedom and Necessity: Félix Ravaisson on Habit and the Moral Life

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ABSTRACT *This paper examines Félix Ravaisson's account of habit, as presented in his 1838 essay Of Habit, and considers its significance in the context of moral practice. This discussion is set in an historical context by drawing attention to the different evaluations of habit in Aristotelian and Kantian philosophies, and it is argued that Kant's hostility to habit is based on the dichotomy between mind and body, and freedom and necessity, that pervades his thought. Ravaisson argues that the phenomenon of habit challenges these dualisms, and at least in this respect anticipates the discussions of habit in the work of twentieth-century phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur.*

The paper outlines Ravaisson's account of habit in general, showing how his analysis of the "double law" of habit develops from the work of Maine de Biran, and highlighting the way in which Ravaisson offers a new and original philosophical interpretation of the phenomena of habit. Whereas Maine de Biran remains within a dualistic framework, and finds that habit is problematic within this framework, Ravaisson uses habit to demonstrate continuity between mind and body, will and nature. Then the focus is narrowed to consider how this analysis of habit is applied to a specifically moral context, and how it illuminates traditional Aristotelian theories of virtue. The paper ends by considering several practical consequences of the foregoing discussion of habit and the moral life.

That a bare and naked *liberum arbitrium* is a chimera is best seen by the difficulty, the long, long continuous effort, which is necessary merely to get rid of a habit, even if one ever so earnestly has made a resolution.

Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers* II 1260 (1849)

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Two of the most important moral philosophers in the European tradition have presented very different views of the role of habit in moral life. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle states that “moral goodness is the child of habit, for we acquire the moral virtues by first exercising them”.¹ Kant, on the other hand, insists that habits must be excluded from the moral sphere; indeed, he suggests that “as a rule, all habits are objectionable”. In his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant describes habit as “a physical inner necessitation to continue behaving in the same way we have behaved thus far”, which as such “deprives even good actions of their moral value because it detracts from our freedom of mind; moreover, it leads to thoughtless repetition of the same action (mechanical uniformity) and so becomes ridiculous”.² Later, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, he argues that “moral maxims . . . cannot be based upon habit (since this belongs to the natural constitution of the will’s determination); on the contrary, if the practice of virtue were to become a habit the subject would suffer loss of that freedom in adopting his maxims which distinguishes an action done from duty”.³ As these passages indicate, Kant’s dismissal of habit is due to the dichotomy between necessity and freedom that separates his theoretical and practical philosophies, according to which the world of our experience and knowledge, conditioned by causal laws, cannot coincide with the domain of moral action, for the latter presupposes an absolutely free will. Insofar as a person acts out of habit, her actions are shaped by past actions and experiences, and seem removed from deliberation and rational choice; habit thus becomes a mere mechanism, an automatism that deprives the moral subject of her autonomy.

This sketch of the Aristotelian and Kantian accounts of habit is simplistic, but it provides a useful starting-point for the present discussion of the role of habit in the moral life. Even more broadly speaking, we may attribute the negative evaluations of habit that we find in many modern philosophers – from Kant to Kierkegaard, and from Maine de Biran, through Bergson, to Sartre – to dualisms that are frequently identified as fundamental to philosophy since Descartes: between freedom and necessity; will and inclination; reason or spirit and the body; subject and world. Twentieth-century phenomenology set itself the task of finding a new philosophical perspective from which to challenge these dualisms, and in texts such as Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and Ricoeur’s *Freedom and Nature* (1950) we find an appeal to the phenomenon of habit in the service of this project—for habit, as Merleau-Ponty writes, “presents great difficulties to traditional philosophies”.⁴

However, over a century before these French phenomenologists directed their attention to habit, the philosopher Félix Ravaisson had argued that habit cannot be understood in mechanistic terms; that it overcomes the dichotomy between freedom and necessity; and that it forces us to think beyond the traditional alternatives of idealism and empiricism. Ravaisson was

an Aristotelian, and was also strongly influenced by Leibniz—but his seminal essay *De l'habitude* (1838) reveals a preoccupation with these basic questions of modern European thought. In this paper I will draw on Ravaisson's essay, recently published in English as *Of Habit*, in order to reflect on the role of habit in moral life. If habit does play an important role in morality and ethics, then we must try to understand what it is, how it operates, and its relationship to human freedom. We cannot merely return to Aristotle, or espouse a more recent version of virtue ethics, without first inquiring further into the nature of habit, nor without considering its significance within the context of the history of modern philosophy.

Ravaisson's *Of Habit* includes a section, towards the end of the text, that is devoted to the moral significance of habit. The author here refers to the English moralist Joseph Butler, who like Ravaisson situates his ethical thinking clearly within the Aristotelian tradition. Bishop Butler seems to have been the first thinker to remark on a double effect of habit that features in several subsequent discussions of the topic: in *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, To the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1736), he notes that habit strengthens action and weakens feeling – that, in other words, it has apparently opposing effects on the active and passive aspects of moral conduct. This “double law”, as Ravaisson describes it, is central to the analysis presented in *Of Habit*.

In Section III of this paper, where I discuss Ravaisson's views about habit and morality, I will return to the connection with Butler. Before this, though, we will see that the two thinkers are linked not only by the influence of Aristotle and by their conviction of the importance of habit in moral life, but also, historically, by an intervening century of scientific and philosophical discourse on the nature and operation of habit in general. Section I of my paper examines this discourse, showing how it constitutes the philosophical background to Ravaisson's discussion of habit. I will then examine, in the second section, Ravaisson's own account of habit in general, and elucidate his view that habit cannot be adequately understood on the basis of dualisms between freedom and necessity, mind and body, will and instinct, etc.—and that, more positively, this means that reflection on habit provides a basis for a philosophical challenge to these dualisms. The third section focuses on how this analysis applies to morality: I will show how Ravaisson, echoing Butler, develops Aristotle's insights into the importance of habit in the moral life, and also responds to some questions that trouble Kantian ethics. In the fourth and final section I will draw out some further implications of Ravaisson's analysis by considering an important practical issue that he does not address—namely, how to deal with bad habits. Here I suggest that when one has to counter the force of undesirable or unhelpful habits, this effort should be conceived, after Ravaisson, not as the struggle of a pure will against inclination, nor as a rational mastery of irrational impulses, but instead as the persistent endeavour to become aware of and attentive to the habits in question.

I. Background to Ravaisson's *Of Habit*

Ravaisson's analysis of habit responds, though not explicitly, to certain philosophical issues that are raised by Aristotle's account of the moral life.⁵ In particular, we can identify in the *Nicomachean Ethics* two distinct concepts: *ethos*, which we may translate as "habit" or perhaps "practice", and *hexis*, which comes from the verb *ekhein*, "to have", and which may be translated as "disposition". Aristotle states that "moral goodness is the child of habit (*ethos*)", and he defines the virtues as *hexeis*, or dispositions. Elsewhere he discusses the concept of *hexis* in terms of the distinction between potentiality and actuality: a *hexis* is a potentiality or capacity (*dunamis*) to act in a certain way, but this is itself acquired—that is to say, actualised—through a process of acting. For example, a *hexis* of mathematical knowledge is the actualisation of a human being's potential, *qua* human being, to have this knowledge, to grasp mathematics; on the other hand, the *hexis* is itself a potentiality or capacity that is actualised only when the agent is in the process of exercising his knowledge.⁶ *Hexis* can thus be understood as a determinate, formed capability to execute a certain range of action—a capability that mediates between pure potentiality and activity itself, and which is a form of power distinct from both of these. This conception of *hexis*, actual in one sense and potential in another, remains rather ambiguous in Aristotle's work, but in Ravaisson's essay we find an attempt to think through the concepts of habit and disposition, and the relationship between them; we find, in fact, a Leibnizian interpretation of *hexis* in terms of a dynamic tendency to act in a particular way, and an explanation of how such a tendency is produced, over time and gradually, by habit—that is to say, by repetition.⁷

But Ravaisson's analysis of habit also draws on, and responds to, a more modern philosophical discourse.⁸ In Book II of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume acknowledges Joseph Butler in remarking that "custom encreases [*sic*] all *active* habits, but diminishes *passive*, according to the observation of a late eminent philosopher".⁹ Hume here generalises Butler's insight from the moral context in which it was articulated: both Hume and Thomas Reid invoke a principle of habit as the foundation of the intelligible order of experience, and thus of human judgement, although their commitment to empiricism prevents them from offering a positive account of habit itself.¹⁰ By the end of the eighteenth century, this question of habit was taken up in France, particularly by Xavier Bichat, whose influential *Physiological Researches on Life and Death* included a more detailed examination of the double effects of habit;¹¹ in 1800 the *Institut de France*—no doubt prompted by Bichat's work—announced an essay competition on the topic of the influence of habit on the faculty of thinking. This competition was won by Pierre Maine de Biran, whose lengthy essay exhibits the influence of both Bichat and the Scottish empiricists, but also ventures further in presenting an explanation of the effects of habit, and in combining physiological research with

an emphasis on the will. Ravaisson takes up Maine de Biran's account of habit, and makes many references to it in his own essay—but he gives to habit a very different, and wholly original, philosophical interpretation.¹²

At the heart of Ravaisson's account of habit is what he calls its "double law". This double law of habit is based on the distinction between activity and passivity, or between voluntary movement and sensation. Ravaisson formulates the double law of habit as follows: "The continuity or the repetition of passion weakens it; the continuity or repetition of action exalts and strengthens it." More specifically, "prolonged or repeated sensation diminishes gradually and eventually fades away. Prolonged or repeated movement becomes gradually easier, quicker and more assured. Perception, which is linked to movement, similarly becomes clearer, swifter and more certain."¹³ This law gives expression to our everyday experience of habit and habituation: we find that repeating a certain action leads to this action becoming more dextrous, precise and efficient; we find that sense-data that are repeatedly or continuously present to us decline in intensity after some time. We say that we have become used or accustomed to something—to the colour of my front door, for example, or to the way a pen feels when I hold it—to the point that we no longer notice it, are no longer aware of the sensations caused by the familiar object. Ravaisson remarks in *Of Habit* that "most of the authors who have examined habit have apprehended this law",¹⁴ but the most sophisticated discussion of it is provided by Maine de Biran, who makes the distinction between activity and passivity central to his analysis of habit.

We may turn briefly to Maine de Biran's essay *The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking* (1802) in order to set out the key points of the analysis that were to be taken up by Ravaisson, whilst at the same time providing some background to the latter's 1838 essay that will help to clarify the particularity and originality of its contribution to the philosophy of habit. Maine de Biran, himself drawing on earlier discussions of the double influence of habit, describes how "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".¹⁵ For Biran, this double influence serves to confirm his dualistic psychology, which identifies distinct systems of perception and sensation, belonging to distinct spheres of the voluntary and the involuntary. He argues that we cannot ascribe the two contrary effects of repetition to the same faculty of the mind, since to do so would be to make the seemingly absurd supposition "that this unique faculty can become at once more inert and more active by the same process of habituation".¹⁶ However, in the course of his discussion Biran struggles to maintain the distinction between activity and passivity, between a faculty of moving and a faculty of feeling: he argues, against any mechanistic interpretation of sensation, that even the most apparently passive experience involves a "*sensitive activity*", that is to

say “a real action peculiar to the sensitive organ which . . . gives the tone rather than receives it”, and he admits that activity and passivity are so intimately connected that “there is hardly any impression that does not result from their mutual co-operation”.¹⁷ Nevertheless, he distinguishes sense-impressions as passive, insofar as they escape the agency of the subject, from the *motor* activity that is classed as activity proper, insofar as it is voluntary.

Integral to Biran’s analysis of habit is the claim that its influence can only be accounted for by a modification that “persists and more or less outlasts the impression”. Biran calls this modification a “determination”, which, he explains, “is effectuated when the organ or the central nervous system is returned to the same condition in which it was by virtue of the original action”.¹⁸ This can happen “spontaneously”, in the absence of the original action, “by virtue of a lively force inherent in the organs”. Corresponding to passive and active impressions are “sensory determinations” and “motor determinations”. According to Biran, a motor determination is a “tendency of the organ or of the motor centre” to repeat an action. It is on this issue that his analysis moves beyond physiology, for he can only account for the being of such tendencies by invoking the metaphysical concept of potentiality or virtuality: determinations exist as *powers* that will be actualised under certain conditions, namely, “renewed external stimulation”.¹⁹ Maintaining that the processes of thought are as subject to habit as physical movements, Biran argues that the imagination, which retains and synthesizes impressions, is constituted by determinations of the brain.²⁰

From a philosophical point of view, one of the most interesting aspects of Biran’s philosophy is his account of self-consciousness, which, he claims, involves both activity and passivity. One’s sense of oneself can be identified with an impression of effort that is felt when the will, in initiating movement, encounters the resistance of the motor organs, which in turn encounter resistance from external objects. Effort is thus a sort of meeting-point of activity (the will) and passivity (resistance). This allows us to see how the contrary effects of habit on active and passive elements combine into a unitary phenomenon: the passive element of sensation diminishes with repetition, whilst the active, motor element becomes more precise and assured—but because we are conscious both of our movements and of ourselves as moving through a *feeling* of effort, this feeling and consequently the self-consciousness it produces decline at the same time as activity is perfected. Eventually, voluntary movements become lost to consciousness: “the perception may become more distinct and more precise on the one hand, while on the other the individual is more completely blinded to the active part which he takes in it”. This means that habit “effaces the line of demarcation between voluntary and involuntary acts, between acquisitions of experience and instinctive operations, between the faculty of feeling and that of perceiving”.²¹ The influence of habit might be best understood in terms of a distinction between activity and passivity, but at the same time the influence of

habit itself undermines this distinction. One of the key conclusions that Biran draws from his analysis of habit, then, is that the faculties of feeling and perception are “indivisibly united”.

For Biran, reflection on the double law of habit leads to an ambivalent assessment of its influence: habit is the “general cause of our progress on the one hand, of our blindness on the other”, for while we owe to habit the facility, precision, and rapidity of our movements and voluntary actions, “it is habit also which hides from us their nature and quantity”.²² Overall, however, his estimation of habit is more negative than positive, since he is most concerned with its influence on thinking, and as we have seen habit tends to blur the distinctions established by reason. At the end of his text Biran portrays habit as both a cause of erroneous belief and a force that binds people “servilely” to their routines, and his conclusion that “all that happens exclusively under the sway of habit should lose its authority before the eyes of reason”²³ could easily be attributed to Kant. Biran’s whole account of habit is characterised by tensions and inconsistencies that testify to a kind of struggle between reason and habit: on the one hand, there is the insistence on a dualistic psychology, and on the other hand the acknowledged failure clearly to separate activity and passivity, perception and sensation, the voluntary and the involuntary.

II. Ravaisson’s analysis of habit

In *Of Habit*, Ravaisson retains the key elements of Maine de Biran’s account of the double law of habit. These can be summarised as follows:

- (i) the claim that sensations are the result of differences between two physical states—that is to say, of felt changes from one state to another;²⁴
- (ii) the distinction between activity and passivity: recognition of the contrary effects of repetition on activity and passivity enables us to formulate the double law of habit;
- (iii) the idea of passivity-within-activity and activity-within-passivity: sensation involves a kind of activity, and conversely motor activity involves passive impressions insofar as movement meets resistance, producing a feeling of effort;
- (iv) the interconnection of passivity and activity in action in general, and in self-consciousness in particular, produces a unified effect of the double law of habit; and
- (v) the claim that habit cannot be accounted for solely in physical or mechanistic terms: the idea of a “determination” (understood as a kind of potency, potentiality or virtuality) that manifests itself as a “tendency” to respond to a certain stimulus in a certain way.

However, whereas Maine de Biran wants to resist the way in which habit undermines the distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary,

regarding this as a pernicious effect of habit that threatens rational thought, Ravaisson argues that in undermining this distinction—which is also that between will and instinct, mind and nature, freedom and necessity—habit reveals a deeper unity that cannot be directly apprehended by the senses, nor grasped by the rational understanding. For Ravaisson, the progress of actions, through the development of habit, from the sphere of will and conscious reflection to spontaneous, quasi-instinctive bodily responses, can be possible only insofar as there is continuity between the mind and the body, between freedom and necessity. And unlike Maine de Biran, he does not believe that distinguishing between activity and passivity requires him to posit two separate faculties of the mind.

This willingness to look beyond the dualistic framework within which Maine de Biran confines his reflection on habit might be due in part to the influence of F. W. J. Schelling, whose Munich lectures Ravaisson is thought to have attended in the early 1830s, and whose ideas were at this time promoted in France by Victor Cousin. In 1835, Ravaisson published a translation of Schelling's preface to a volume of Cousin's work;²⁵ Schelling, for his part, expressed his regard for Ravaisson, describing him in the *Philosophy of Revelation* as "a Frenchman to whom we owe important work on Aristotle".²⁶ However, the extent of Ravaisson's contact with and debt to Schelling's philosophy is difficult to establish, and remains a point of disagreement among French commentators. Perhaps it was rather the intensive study of Aristotle in the years leading up to the publication of *De l'habitude* that allowed Ravaisson to gain some distance from the dualisms of modern thought, for Aristotle's view that intellectual, moral and technical capacities alike are acquired *hexeis* constitutes, it may be argued, "the exact metaphysical antithesis of the Cartesian order of method".²⁷

Having said this, Ravaisson's advance on Maine de Biran is articulated in unmistakably modern terms: he argues that it is impossible to provide either a materialist or a rationalist explanation for the double law of habit. In particular, it is the *tendency* produced by habit that eludes materialism, whilst the accompanying decline of will and consciousness renders a rationalist account inadequate:

The gradual weakening of the sensations and the increasing ease of the movements could perhaps be explained hypothetically by some change (which anatomy has not discovered) in the physical constitution of the organs. But no organic modification can explain the *tendency*, the inclination whose progress coincides with the degradation of sensation and effort. The attempts made to explain the increasing ease and certainty of the movements, and the disappearance of sensation, by the progress of attention, of will, and of intelligence, might still be considered capable of a certain level of success. But if the sensation disappears in the long run because attention tires of it and turns elsewhere,

how is it that sensibility increasingly demands this sensation that the will abandons? If movement becomes swifter and easier because intelligence knows better all its parts, and because the will synthesises the action with more precision and assurance, how is it that the increasing facility of movement coincides with the diminution of will and consciousness?²⁸

Insisting that “both physical and rationalist theories are lacking on this point”, Ravaisson claims that the double law of habit “can be explained only by the development of a Spontaneity that is at once active and passive, equally opposed to mechanical Fatality and to reflective Freedom”. Here, in contrast to Biran, he positively affirms the way in which *reflection* on habit *overcomes* the distinction between activity and passivity, since the *principle* of habit *underlies* this distinction. While Ravaisson’s vocabulary now appears dated, his philosophical critique of mechanistic theories is not only historically interesting, but accords with contemporary critiques of mechanism that draw on developments in the neurosciences. As Cathérine Malabou argues, the plasticity of the brain—its ongoing formation through the individual’s actions and interactions—that is central to current theories of neuronal functioning renders outmoded the analogy between brain and machine, and replaces rigid determinism with a new view of the brain as a “self-cultivating organ”.²⁹ It is therefore important to recognise the distinction between materialism and mechanism, and Ravaisson’s critique of the latter resonates with the most recent ways of conceptualising the former.

Ravaisson describes the simultaneously active and passive “spontaneity” that develops through habit as an “obscure” or “secret” activity within sensibility. As we have seen, Biran had already posited a pre-reflective and involuntary “sensitive activity”, but Ravaisson develops this idea and uses it to explain the double law of habit. He argues that an activity within the sense-organs responds to stimulation by bringing the organ “up to the tone of the sensation” (this is what Biran describes as a “sensory determination”), thus reducing the difference that a renewed sensation will make to the organ, and so lessening the sensation’s impact and intensity. For Ravaisson, this “obscure” activity is nothing mystical or unfathomable, but rather the force of inertia: the “tendency to persist” in a particular way of being that the French philosopher, after Leibniz, identifies as “the universal law, the fundamental character” of all beings.³⁰ When sensations are continued or repeated, “there develops within sensibility . . . a tendency to persist in the same state to which the impression has brought it, or else to come back to this state”, and this explains why the difference “between the state of the subject and the state to which the external impression has brought it increasingly disappears”, causing the sensation to fade.³¹ In the absence of the sensation to which the individual has become habituated, this activity will manifest itself as desire for the sensation. So, the same process that removes

sensations from conscious awareness also creates an attachment to and a need for these sensations, which reveals itself only when the cause of the sensation is no longer present.

Since movements always involve a degree of passivity—that is, of resistance and a corresponding feeling of effort—the same “secret activity” (or desire) develops here, reducing resistance and effort and thus facilitating actions as well as making them less conscious. As Ravaisson explains, through habit

The [repeated] action itself becomes more of a tendency, an inclination that no longer awaits the commandments of the will but rather anticipates them, and which even escapes entirely and irremediably both will and consciousness . . . In this way, continuity or repetition brings about a sort of obscure activity that increasingly anticipates (*prévient*) both the impression of external objects in sensibility, and the will in activity. In activity, it reproduces the action itself; in sensibility it does not reproduce the sensation, the passion—for this requires an external cause – but calls for it, invokes it; in a certain sense it implores the sensation.³²

Behind the double law of habit, then, lies a single force; continuity or repetition weakens sensibility and excites the power of movement “in the same way, by one and the same cause: the development of an unreflective spontaneity, which breaks into passivity and the organism, and increasingly establishes itself there, beyond, beneath the region of will, personality and consciousness”.

Crucially, Ravaisson argues that this spontaneity is both intelligent and free even though it has left the sphere of will and reflection—even though it is “blind”, as he puts it. It is for this reason that his estimation of habit is so much more positive than Biran’s, who echoes Kant in identifying intelligence and freedom with reflection and the will. For Biran, the “blindness” of habit is an obstacle to knowledge, whereas for Ravaisson this same fact reveals an intelligence not confined to mental faculties, but dispersed throughout the body. He argues that although movements, as they become habitual, leave the sphere of will and reflection, they do not cease to be intelligent. A habit “does not become the mechanical effect of an external impulse, but rather the effect of an inclination that follows from the will.” Such inclinations are formed gradually, and when a habitual action is traced back to its origin in consciousness, one “always finds that it inclines towards the end that the will had originally proposed. But every inclination towards a goal implies intelligence”³³—and this means that habit cannot be regarded as a mechanism. According to Ravaisson, habit does have a kind of necessity, but this is not physical or mechanical necessity, “not an external necessity of constraint, but a necessity of attraction and desire . . . It is the final cause that increasingly predominates over efficient causality and which

absorbs the latter into itself.”³⁴ The force of habit is not opposed to freedom, but rather *follows from* freedom: it is “a law of the limbs, which follows on from the freedom of the spirit”; “an inclination that follows from the will”.

On this account, then, just as intelligence is not confined to reflective thought, freedom and purposiveness are not confined to the will, and are therefore not annulled by habit, but rather *made flesh*: as habit develops, freedom increasingly pervades the body, and increasingly animates it. The goals that the will originally proposes become the form of the body. This formed body, or “habit-body”, as we might call it, is not a physical thing, but rather a dynamic unity of capacities and dispositions to move, to sense, to experience and to understand in particular ways. What happens in habit is that freedom and intelligence become more immediate, in a sense more natural: “inclination, as it takes over from the will, comes closer and closer to the actuality that it aims to realise; it increasingly adopts its form . . . The interval that the understanding represents between the movement and its goal gradually diminishes; the distinction is effaced; the end whose idea gave rise to the inclination . . . becomes fused with it”.³⁵ In other words, the progression of habit arrives eventually at the “immediate intelligence” of instinct: this is why habit can be called a “second nature”. Ravaisson puts this same point in different terms by stating that habit transforms ideas (i.e. goals, purposes) into actions, into concrete movements:

In reflection and will, the end of movement is an idea, an ideal to be accomplished: something that should be, that can be, and which is not yet. It is a possibility to be realised. But as the end becomes fused with the movement, and the movement with the tendency, possibility, the ideal, is realised in it. The *idea* becomes *being*, the very being of the movement and of the tendency that it determines . . .

Ultimately, it is more and more outside the sphere of personality, beyond the influence of the central organ of the will – that is to say, *within* the immediate organs of movements – that the inclinations constituting the habit are formed, and the ideas are realised. Such inclinations, such ideas become more and more the form, the way of being, even the very being of these organs.³⁶

Ravaisson here recognises what Merleau-Ponty will later call embodied intelligence, a kind of “knowledge in the hands”. Merleau-Ponty follows Ravaisson in arguing that habit challenges a dualistic view of the human being, according to which the body is merely a mechanism while the mind is of a wholly different order:

[I]t is the body which ‘understands’ in the acquisition of habit. This way of putting it will appear absurd, if understanding is subsuming a sense-datum

under an idea, and if the body is an object. But the phenomenon of habit is just what prompts us to revise our notion of ‘understand’ and our notion of the body. To understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance – and the body is our anchorage in a world.³⁷

However, for Ravaisson reflection on habit not only challenges Cartesian and Kantian dualisms, and makes us look at the human being differently. He makes the further claim that insofar as habit is analogous to nature it reveals to us the inner reality of nature as a whole. Just as the progress of habit demonstrates the continuity between freedom and necessity, between mind and matter, *within* the human being, so it also shows us this continuity throughout nature—which is thus, like the human body, pervaded by a spontaneous unreflective intelligence that inclines towards, or rather desires, the good. In habit, we begin with the will and reflection and move down, as it were, to an unconscious immediacy of embodied inclinations. But Ravaisson argues that in fact this intelligent but unreflective spontaneity was there all along, as the very essence of nature, and that the reflective will is but the manifestation of this within the developed form of consciousness that distinguishes the human being from other creatures.

III. Ravaisson on habit in the moral sphere

Ravaisson devotes a section of his essay to habit in the moral sphere. Here he simply applies to this sphere his general analysis, which as we have seen focuses on the “double law” of habit, and on the notion of an active tendency that is produced by habit. From an historical point of view, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourse on habit here comes full circle, or folds back upon itself: the double influence of habit was first discussed, by Butler, in a specifically moral context, and subsequently taken out of this context, or at least generalised from it, by Hume in the *Treatise*; the Scottish empiricist philosophy of habit was then taken up in France by Bichat and Maine de Biran, whose analysis of habit was at once echoed and transformed by Ravaisson. By the time the latter comes to reflect on habit, then, Butler’s remarks on the double influence of repetition on moral conduct have been developed into a much fuller account that incorporates both physiological and metaphysical explanation. Only Ravaisson’s work brings together a clear formulation of the “double law of habit”; a properly philosophical attempt to explain this law, which challenges the dualisms of modern thought; and a return to the ethical considerations that were first highlighted by Butler. As we shall see, Ravaisson’s philosophy of habit also returns to the explicitly Christian context of the English bishop’s moral psychology.

When he turns to reflect on the moral significance of the effects of habit, then, Ravaisson recalls the discussion presented in Butler’s *The Analogy of*

Religion, Natural and Revealed, To the Constitution and Course of Nature. Having made a distinction between active and passive habits—the former including perceptions and actions of both the body and the mind, the latter denoting “associations of ideas” as well as feelings—Butler describes how active habits are formed and strengthened through repeated exercise, while “passive impressions, by being repeated, grow weaker: thoughts, by often passing through the mind, are felt less sensibly”. The examples he provides of the diminution of feeling clearly situate his discussion in the context of moral psychology: becoming accustomed to danger lessens fear; becoming accustomed to distress lessens pity. When we consider that actions are often motivated by feelings, we find that the dual effects of habit work in combination:

From these two observations together, that practical habits are formed and strengthened by repeated acts; and that passive impressions, by being repeated upon us, grow weaker; it must follow, that active habits may be gradually forming and strengthening, by a course of acting on such and such motives and excitements, whilst these motives and excitements themselves are, by proportionate degrees, growing less sensible, i.e. are continually less and less sensibly felt, even as the active habits strengthen. And experience confirms this; for active principles, at the very time that they are less lively in perception than they were, are found to be, some how, wrought more thoroughly into the temper and character, and become more effectual in influencing our practice.³⁸

Butler does not make his view of the implications of this double law of habit especially clear, but his comments on the examples of distress and pity indicate that he regards the double law of habit as an aid to the development of a good moral character. Through habit, he suggests, a person will become less upset by the suffering of others but better able to act to help to relieve this suffering. Making reference to Butler, Ravaisson states that repetition “gradually leads the pleasure of action to replace the more transient pleasure of passive sensibility. In this way, as habit destroys the passive emotions of pity, the helpful activity and the inner joys of charity develop more and more in the heart of the one who does good . . . [L]ove is augmented by its own expressions”.³⁹

This argument raises questions about the role of feelings, or emotions, in the moral life—questions that neither Butler nor Ravaisson addresses. According to some theories of virtue—notably, that of Aristotle—a virtuous person is one who has a settled disposition to *feel* in certain ways as well as to act in certain ways.⁴⁰ It would seem, therefore, that anyone wishing to develop such a moral theory has to consider the implications of the double law of habit. If habit causes feelings to decline, presumably to the point of expiration, then how is the role of emotional response—whether as a character

trait; as the pleasure and pain accompanying virtuous and vicious acts; or as a motivational factor in action—to be accommodated? A preliminary answer to this question (which requires more extensive discussion than is possible here) must appeal to Ravaisson's insistence, after Maine de Biran, that activity always includes an element of passivity, and passivity always includes activity. Indeed, prior to his discussion of habit in the moral sphere, Ravaisson contrasts active and passive sensation, invoking the example of two drinkers: the first, who drinks merely to get intoxicated, loses his powers of taste with repetition; the second, who is a connoisseur, develops a more refined and discerning palate. This distinction may be applied to the moral domain, and in fact gains some credibility when we consider a phenomenon such as compassion fatigue, which is most often discussed in the particularly passive context of seeing images of distress on television. The sympathy felt in this situation would, then, be a passive feeling that declines with repetition, whereas in a more active context—say, when training to be a counsellor or therapist—a person may well develop a refined sensitivity to the suffering of others. Although Ravaisson does not explicitly present this argument in relation to morality, his emphasis on love indicates that in this sphere, as elsewhere, the distinction between activity and passivity rests on a more profound coincidence or unity: love is at once passive and active; at once a feeling and a power.

Ravaisson goes on to show how his philosophical analysis of habit's progress from reflective will to spontaneous inclination applies to moral life. Just as motor habit develops to the point where it meets the immediacy of instinct, so moral habit can become a second nature:

Ultimately, in the activity of the soul, as in that of movement, habit gradually transforms the will proper to action into an involuntary inclination. Mores, morality, are formed in this manner. Virtue is first of all an effort and wearisome; it becomes something attractive and a pleasure only through practice, as a desire that forgets itself or that is unaware of itself, and gradually it draws near to the holiness of innocence. Such is the very secret of education: its art consists in attracting someone towards the good by action, thus fixing the inclination for it. In this way a *second nature* is formed.⁴¹

In a sense this just takes us back to Aristotle's ethics—but, as I hope to have shown, in Ravaisson's essay these insights are accompanied by both a detailed account of the operation of habit, and an appreciation of its significance from the point of view of the history of modern philosophy. More than this, however, the philosophy of nature that Ravaisson develops on the basis of his interpretation of habit provides a wider context for his moral psychology, for he finds that “it is the natural spontaneity of desire that is the very substance of action, at the same time as being its source and primary

origin". In other words, there is a natural orientation to the good that is prior to the exertion of the reflective will:

just as in movement, if it is the will that poses the goal in space, and determines the direction, it is not the will—or at least it is not reflective will—that works out and devises in advance the very production of movement; for this can only arise from the depths of instinct and desire, where the idea of nature becomes being and substance. In the same way, in the moral world the understanding distinguishes the end and the will proposes it, but it is neither the will nor the abstract understanding that can initially stir the powers of the soul at their source so as to push them towards the good. It is the good itself, at least the idea of the good, which descends into these depths, engendering love in them and raising that love up to itself. Will constitutes only the form of the action; the unreflective freedom of Love constitutes all its substance . . . Nature lies wholly in desire, and desire, in turn, lies in the good that attracts it.⁴²

In identifying this natural orientation towards the good that underlies the will, Ravaisson implicitly offers a response to the problem of motivation that persists within Kantian moral philosophy: why should I be moral? why should I heed the call of duty? why should I follow reason rather than inclination? why should the feeling of respect for the moral law outweigh other feelings and desires? Ravaisson's solution involves the claim—which is based on his analysis of habit—that it is love rather than reason that grounds the moral life. This love constitutes, he suggests, a kind of "grace" insofar as the natural inclination to the good is something effortless, a gift given to the will to prepare it and guide it. "Nature is prevenient grace", he writes, quoting the seventeenth-century theologian Fénelon.⁴³ For Ravaisson, nature itself may be regarded by human beings as a gift that is given prior to action, to assist and facilitate it, because the principle of nature is love, which expresses itself within each individual as a spontaneous desire for and tendency towards the good that precedes the understanding and the will. In the end, this love and desire that is the "intimate source of ourselves" can be identified as "God within us". Just as he posits continuity between freedom and necessity, mind and body, will and instinct, so this "continuism"⁴⁴ encompasses the theological distinction between nature and grace. In *Of Habit* Ravaisson presents this conclusion as following from his philosophical analysis, rather than as a dogmatic basis for philosophical reflection. However, if, as I have suggested elsewhere,⁴⁵ the text has a circular structure and makes most sense read backwards, so to speak, then the ontology of habit becomes more closely linked to a theology of grace.

It may well be that these conclusions of Ravaisson's account of habit in the moral sphere appear rather optimistic. How, on this view, are we to

explain our apparently natural inclinations towards what reason can recognise as undesirable ends, and the bad habits to which these inclinations often lead? Although he acknowledges that habit can degenerate into tics and addictions, Ravaisson does not address this question: curiously, he writes of grace but not of sin; of desire for the good but not of perversity. However, the theological interpretation that he appends to his analysis of virtue may illuminate rather than obscure the issue of vice, for in the Christian tradition the doctrine of grace is accompanied by the idea that people close themselves to this grace, turn away from it. Even if we put the religious vocabulary to one side and regard the word “gift” as signifying a pre-reflective, involuntary, natural orientation towards the good, we can quite easily recognise that a gift may be offered but not accepted: it may be unnoticed, ignored or rejected. So, it may be that we have a profound inclination towards the good, that we *are* motivated by love, and yet a certain degree of ignorance distorts or displaces this tendency. It may even be the case that love is so essential to human life, so great a need, that its absence, withdrawal or contingency is deeply disruptive. This would mean that Ravaisson’s optimism is at least compatible with the fact that people often have unhealthy inclinations—which, indeed, gain more force and thus become more problematic when they develop into habits. Furthermore, we may draw from his philosophical analysis of habit the terms in which to comprehend a person’s failure to receive, to appropriate or to utilise the gift of habit, for he understands passivity in two ways: as receptivity and as resistance.⁴⁶ Of course, both of these forms of passivity involve an element of activity and can be understood dynamically, as opening and as contraction. Ravaisson does not develop this distinction between receptivity and resistance, but doing so would not only help to account for the possibility of refusing what is given—such as a prevenient *hexis* or capability for virtuous action: a capability that, insofar as it is also an inclination, may be conceived as love itself—but would also enrich our understanding of human affectivity in general.⁴⁷

IV. From bad habits to good habits

Whereas Kant argues that habits are to be excluded from morality, Aristotle regards moral life as consisting in the avoidance or elimination of bad habits and the cultivation or preservation of good habits. While Kant opposes habit to freedom, moral virtue for the Greek philosopher is grounded in an acquired habit of *choosing* (*hexis prohairetike*), a gradual determination of desire, a shaping of freedom. Ravaisson, in showing that habit is not opposed to freedom and intelligence, gives us good reason to prefer Aristotle’s view to Kant’s, and also provides us with elements of the philosophical analysis of habit that is required in order to make progress with this kind of ethical theory. To conclude, I now wish to consider briefly how Ravaisson’s account of habit might contribute to moral practice. Is there anything in his

discussion of habit that will actually help us to live well? Given that we do often find ourselves struggling against the force of old, unwanted habits, how can we bring about the transition from bad habits to good habits?

Let us first clarify the nature of the problem. We are beings who change and develop through time. It may well be that our habits reflect consciously-chosen purposes, and are thus not essentially opposed to freedom and intelligence, but it is quite possible that we might change our purposes and yet continue to carry—indeed, to *embody*—habits that developed according to out-of-date purposes. We then find that our old but persistent habits are in conflict with our new goals, and this conflict will be particularly acute when the will has undergone a profound reorientation. We find in Augustine's *Confessions* a description of precisely this predicament. Augustine, recalling his own struggle to live a pure life once he has converted to Christianity, comments on the famous passage in Romans 7, where Paul writes that "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it". Augustine depicts habit as the constraining force:

the rule of sin is the force of habit, by which the mind is swept along and held fast even against its will . . . I was held fast, not in fetters clamped upon me by another, but by my own will, which had the strength of iron chains . . . [For desire had grown from my will] and when I gave in to desire habit was born, and when I did not resist the habit it became a necessity . . . These two wills within me, one old, one new, one the servant of the flesh, the other of the spirit, were in conflict and between them they tore my soul apart.⁴⁸

Here Augustine, like Ravaisson, finds that habit proceeds from "will" to "necessity", so that desires come to be embodied, made "flesh"; they become, as the French philosopher puts it, "laws of the limbs that follow on from the freedom of the spirit". But Augustine encounters a problem that Ravaisson does not consider: he finds himself with a habit-body that is in opposition to his "new will" to serve God and live a good life. In fact, what has happened in Augustine's case is that his conception of the good life has changed: his *telos* is no longer sensual enjoyment—sought in one instance by stealing pears from the orchard—but the spiritual fruits of renunciation and obedience. Whereas he once equated freedom with licentiousness, he now seeks liberation from the bondage of his appetites and passions.

Ravaisson, whose moral thinking is clearly Aristotelian rather than Platonic, does not discuss or even acknowledge this possibility. Nevertheless, his analysis of habit suggests that conceiving the moral life in terms of a struggle between two opposed factions of the human being—between mind and body, between will and inclination—cannot lead to an adequate understanding of habit, and indeed will only exacerbate the kind of conflict that Augustine describes. Ravaisson's account emphasises the depth of habit, the

way in which it reaches “all the way down” into the body: through habit certain purposes “become more and more the form, the way of being, even the very being of [the] organs”, and this manner of being is not just a shape or pattern but a dynamic tendency that has its own momentum. This explains why seeing things differently, changing one’s mind and even making a firm resolution are usually insufficient to counter the force of habit: will and reflection are powerful but, it seems, relatively superficial aspects of ourselves. Our very being is conditioned by habits whose rationales are long forgotten, or which may never have been grasped explicitly.

However, Ravaisson also indicates that habit is a reversible process. The fact that there is continuity from will to inclination implies that one can move by degrees in the other direction, too:

it is by a succession of imperceptible degrees that inclinations take over from acts of will. It is also by an imperceptible degradation that these inclinations, born from custom, often decline if custom comes to be interrupted, and that the movements removed from the will return to its sphere after some time . . . Consciousness feels itself expire along with the will, and then come back to life with it, by a gradation and degradation which are continuous; and consciousness is the first, immediate and unique measure of continuity.⁴⁹

When habits are to be undone, there are three practical points to take into consideration—and each of these is supported and illuminated by the discussion presented in *Of Habit*. First, just as habits take time to develop, to establish themselves in the depth of the lived body, so they take time to retreat. Getting rid of a habit may be a slow process that requires patience and persistence, and recognising this is likely to help the struggling person to remain patient when no change of behaviour is apparent. Kierkegaard writes of “the long, long continuous effort, which is necessary merely to get rid of a habit, even if one ever so earnestly has made a resolution”,⁵⁰ suggesting that unwanted habits are not to be countered by brute force, or by a single moment of clear vision and decision, but by a “long, continuous effort” to retrace the progress of habit gradually, just as the habit first developed through continuity or repetition and by a series of imperceptible degrees.

Second, the elimination of a habit is likely to be painful even when the habit is unhealthy. Ravaisson makes this point with respect to habits at the organic level, but it applies to other kinds of habit, too: “one becomes accustomed over time to the most violent poisons . . . the most unhealthy air and food become the very conditions of health”.⁵¹ This means that giving up any habit, even an unhealthy one, will bring about a transitional period of instability and discomfort. On the other hand, the same point means that a new, healthier habit that is initially inconvenient and uncomfortable will eventually become natural and easy: “Movements or situations that initially are

most difficult and tiring become over time the most convenient, and end up by making themselves into indispensable conditions of the functions to which they have always been associated”⁵²—and it is for this reason, at least, that habit can be considered a form of grace. Ravaisson’s reference here to particular environmental and situational conditions also accentuates the contextual nature of habit: habits can be traced only partially within the physical body, for they are constitutive of a lived body that is irreducibly worldly, relational, intentional, erotic, responsive. This is why a change of scene is sometimes sufficient to break a habit, although if the change is temporary then the break may well prove, on returning home, to be merely an interruption. In his book on Proust—who, aided by Ravaisson’s legacy, is one of the great modern thinkers of habit—Samuel Beckett writes that “Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment . . . Habit is the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects”.⁵³

The third and last practical point to be drawn from *Of Habit* is perhaps the most important: one way to deal with a tenacious unwanted habit is to lead it back to the sphere of consciousness, for only here can it be influenced by reflection and the will. As Ravaisson argues, habits take root in passivity: in sensations and in feelings that have faded to obscurity; and their activity, their power, is that of desire, need, attachment, craving. We can follow Joseph Butler in including in this category of passivity “associations of ideas”, those thoughts which pass through the mind unbidden, and perhaps unacknowledged. Several thinkers have observed that the power of habit lies to a great extent in the degree to which it remains concealed: Hume, for example, remarks that “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”;⁵⁴ Kierkegaard writes that “of all enemies, habit is perhaps the most cunning, and above all it is cunning enough never to let itself be seen, because the person who sees the habit is saved from the habit. Habit is not like other enemies that one sees and against which one aggressively defends oneself; the struggle is actually with oneself in getting to see it.”⁵⁵ This “seeing” is not to be understood in intellectualist terms, for no act of cognition is going to change one’s embodiment. And if habit resides in passivity, rather than in the activities that manifest it, then this is where it must be “seen”: awareness of habit has to be cultivated at the level of sensations, feelings, and involuntary thoughts. This kind of awareness is deliberately cultivated in certain therapeutic and spiritual exercises—for example, in psychoanalysis or cognitive behavioural therapy, and in Buddhist meditation techniques, which reportedly provide accomplished practitioners with the ability to observe sensations, emotions and thoughts as they arise, from moment to moment. This kind of awareness can itself become a capability and even a tendency – a *hexis*.

While the Kantian view of ethics would lead to the ignoring, dismissal or suppression of involuntary affects, regarded as merely mechanical, a view that takes habit more seriously makes attentiveness to these affects, to the connections between them, and to the conditions under which they recur an important element of moral life. Developing the faculty of awareness of passive phenomena—which, after all, are available to attention at every moment—can gradually enable a person to discriminate between habits in order to choose which to maintain and which to let go of, which to yield to and which to resist. Moral practice, on this account, would consist not merely in the cultivation of good habits and the elimination of unwanted habits, but in preventing the latter from taking hold within the body through the development of a certain pattern of receptivity and resistance that is based on clear and experiential understanding. This might serve as a definition of practical wisdom.

Just as—to return once more to Aristotle—one swallow does not make a summer, and one brave act does not make a courageous person nor one drink an alcoholic, so a single moment of insight is unlikely to break a habit. This is why the techniques used to cultivate awareness of habits mimic the acquisition of habits themselves in the duration, frequency and regularity of their repetition: the analysand sees her analyst four or five times a week; the Buddhist maintains a daily meditation practice; the patient undergoing cognitive behavioural therapy keeps a diary of her thoughts and feelings, and so on. Establishing these routines may be “first of all an effort, and wearisome”, as Ravaissón describes the development of moral virtues. His philosophy of habit suggests that techniques designed to support human development and flourishing—whether they operate within an ancient or modern, religious or medical paradigm—can share a theoretical basis in common with virtue ethics, and may thus be incorporated within that moral tradition’s understanding of the aims, criteria, and practices of a good life.

A final point that should be noted is that although Ravaissón’s analysis of habit as mediating between freedom and necessity resonates with materialist critiques of determinism, and with the most recent developments in the neurosciences, this does not imply that the latter eclipse or can replace philosophical reflection. Both Ravaissón’s vocabulary—of tendency, desire, intuition, virtue, love and grace—and his method, which includes introspection and phenomenological description, exemplify the first-personal order of his thinking of habit, and this in turn is mirrored in its practical, ethical applications. Knowledge of cerebral functioning and neurogenesis, articulated always in the third person, is no doubt valuable, but such knowledge is not in itself psychically transformative, nor even morally significant, and will not by itself lead to human flourishing. A good human life *can* be lived in ignorance of scientific theory, but not in ignorance of habit.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2, Ch. 1.
2. Kant, I. [1798] (1974) *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. M. Gregor (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff), pp. 148–49.
3. Kant, I. [1797] (1996) *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), ms. 6: 409. See also 6: 407: “An *aptitude (habitus)* is a facility in acting and a subjective perfection of *choice*.—But not every such *facility* is a *free aptitude (habitus libertatis)*; for if it is a *habit (assuetudo)*, that is, a uniformity in action that has become a *necessity* through frequent repetition, it is not one that proceeds from freedom, and therefore not a moral aptitude.”
4. Merleau-Ponty, M. [1945] (1994) *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge), p. 142.
5. For discussion of the role of habit in Aristotle’s ethics, see Burnyeat, M.F. (1980) “Aristotle on learning to be good” in: A. Oksenberg Rorty (Ed.), *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, pp. 69–92 (Berkeley, CA and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press); Garver, E. “Aristotle’s metaphysics of morals”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 27, January 1989, pp. 7–28; and Joe Sachs’ Preface and Introduction to his translation of Aristotle (2002) *Nicomachean Ethics* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing), pp. vii–xvii.
6. See Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 417a23–b2. On Aristotle’s concept of *hexis*, see Garver, “Aristotle’s metaphysics of morals”; and Rodrigo, P. “La dynamique de l’*hexis* chez Aristote”, *Alter* no. 12/2004 (Paris: Vrin), pp. 11–25.
7. The concept of repetition is not itself problematised in Ravaissan’s text, and he often presents “continuity or repetition” as alternative—and, implicitly, equivalent—sources of habit. Like earlier philosophers of habit, he takes repetition for granted, ignoring the crucial question of the possibility of repetition: *what* is repeated? what counts as “the same”? This question was raised, albeit obscurely, by Søren Kierkegaard just four or five years after the publication of *De l’habitude*: in both *Johannes Climacus*, or *De omnibus dubitandum est* and *Repetition* (1843) the Danish philosopher notes the impossibility of repetition in both empirical reality (which is characterised by infinite variation) and in ideality (an atemporal realm of abstract identity). Kierkegaard argues that the possibility of repetition is “the most interior problem” and must be located “within the individual”—within subjective consciousness, conceived as the intersection or synthesis of ideality and empirical actuality—where “it is not a question of the repetition of something external but of the repetition of his freedom”. See Kierkegaard, S. [1843] (1983) *Repetition*, trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 304; also pp. 274–75. Subsequently, philosophers such as Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl and Gilles Deleuze have engaged extensively with this problem of repetition; for Ravaissan’s influence on later French thought, see Janicaud, D. (1997) *Ravaissan et la métaphysique*, 2^{ème} édition (Paris: Vrin); for a short overview, see Marin, C. (2004) ‘L’être et l’habitude dans la philosophie française contemporaine’ in *Alter* 12, pp. 149–72. The issue requires sustained discussion and cannot be explored adequately within the confines of the present paper, where I follow Ravaissan in focusing on other aspects of the question of habit.
8. Ravaissan was responding to early modern scientific theories, as well as to philosophical discussions of habit; see Cazeneuve, J. (1958) *La philosophie médicale de Ravaissan* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France).
9. Hume, D. [1739–1740] (1978) *A Treatise on Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 424. For a discussion of Butler’s account of habit and its influence on Hume, see Wright, J. (1995) “Hume and Butler on habit and moral character” in: M.A. Stewart and J.P. Wright (Eds.), *Hume and Hume’s Connexions*, pp. 105–18 (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press).
10. See, for example, Hume, D. [1748] (1975) *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 43.

11. See Bichat, X. [1800] (1809) *Physiological Researches on Life and Death*, trans. T. Watkins (Philadelphia, PA: Smith and Maxwell), pp. 34–40.
12. Jacques Derrida comments that Ravaisson “derives his axioms from Maine de Biran”, but does not appear to recognise the originality of Ravaisson’s interpretation of his predecessor’s analysis. See Derrida, J. (2005) *On Touching*, trans. C. Irizarry (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), p. 155.
13. Ravaisson, F. [1838] (2008) *Of Habit*, trans. C. Carlisle and M. Sinclair (London: Continuum), p. 49.
14. See *ibid.*, p. 121.
15. de Biran, P.M. [1803] (1970) *The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking*, trans. M. Donaldson Boehm (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), p. 219.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 87–88.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 54–56.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–69.
19. See *ibid.*, p. 70: “When this tendency passes from the *virtual* to the *actual*, as a result of renewed external stimulation, the individual wills and executes the same movement.”
20. See *ibid.*, p. 108.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 49; 100–01.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
24. This claim can be traced back to Xavier Bichat: see his *Physiological Researches on Life and Death*, pp. 35–37.
25. See Ravaisson, F. (1835) “Jugement de Schelling sur la philosophie de M. Cousin, et sur l’état de la philosophie française et de la philosophie allemande en générale”, in *Révue germanique*, III, 10, pp. 3–24.
26. Schelling, F.W.J. (1856–61) *Sämmtliche Werke* (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta), vol. XI, p. 328.
27. See Rodrigo, “La dynamique de l’*hexis* chez Aristote”, p. 25. See also Marion, J-L. (1975) *Sur l’ontologie grise de Descartes. Science cartésienne et savoir aristotélicien dans les Regulae* (Paris: Vrin), Ch. 1.
28. Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, pp. 53–55.
29. Malabou, C. (2008) *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans. S. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press), p. 30. In this text Malabou argues that the neuro-scientific concept of plasticity takes us “between determination and freedom”—see especially Ch. 1.
30. See Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, p. 27. This dynamic conception of inertia has more in common with Spinoza’s *conatus* than with Newton’s mechanistic theory. Leibniz argues, contra Newton, that a body has “in itself . . . a tendency to persevere in what sequences of changes it has begun”; see (1998) “Nature itself: or, the Inherent Force or Activity of Created Things”, p. 217, in: R. Woolhouse and R. Francks (Eds.), *Philosophical Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). For a discussion of Leibniz’s influence on Ravaisson, see the Editors’ Introduction and Commentary in *Of Habit*, pp. 13–14; 79–81.
31. See Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, p. 51.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 55–7.
37. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 44.
38. Butler, J. [1736] (1857) *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (London: Bell and Daldy), p. 108.
39. Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, p. 69.
40. L.A. Kosman offers an excellent discussion of this aspect of Aristotle’s ethics in “Being properly affected: Virtues and feelings in Aristotle’s ethics” in: A. Rorty (Ed.),

- Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, pp. 103–16 (Berkeley, CA and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press).
41. Ravaiss, *Of Habit*, p. 69.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
43. The notion of prevenient grace can be traced back to Augustine, who distinguishes between the “prevenient grace” that brings a person to the point of conversion; the “operative grace” that accomplishes the liberation from sin that occurs at the moment of conversion; and the “co-operative grace” that, following conversion, assists the liberated will’s pursuit of spiritual growth. Prevenient grace precedes the will and enables it, in spite of its sinful condition, to choose to seek salvation and to submit to God.
44. This term is used, disparagingly, by Derrida to describe Ravaiss’s thought; see *On Touching*, p. 156.
45. See the Editors’ Introduction to *Of Habit*, pp. 15–17; and the Editors’ Commentary, pp. 112–14.
46. On receptivity, see *Of Habit*, pp. 31, 35–37; on resistance, see pp. 43–45, 61. Just as Ravaiss conceives passivity as both receptivity and resistance, so he conceives activity as both spontaneity and force.
47. The distinction between receptivity and resistance lies at the heart of the concept of plasticity, which is employed in current neuro-scientific theory; See Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, p. 5. In clarifying the distinction between plasticity and flexibility, Malabou accentuates the political significance of the former, which denotes a capacity for resistance as well as for the reception of form. The scientific sources for her conception of plasticity include LeDoux, J. (2002) *Synaptic Self* (New York: Viking) and Ameisen, J-C. (1999) *La sculpture du vivant: Le Suicide cellulaire ou la mort créatrice* (Paris: Seuil).
48. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII, Section 5.
49. Ravaiss, *Of Habit*, p. 57.
50. Kierkegaard, S. (1967–78) *Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong (Bloomington, IN and London: Indiana University Press), vol. II, 1260.
51. Ravaiss, *Of Habit*, p. 63.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
53. Beckett, S. (1965) *Proust* (London: John Calder), pp. 18–19.
54. Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, pp. 28–9.
55. Kierkegaard, S. [1847] (1995) *Works of Love*, trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 36.