Personal Acts, Habit, and Embodied Agency in

Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*

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**I. Introduction**

In June of 2019, the Utah Jazz traded for Mike Conley, the perennial almost all-star who had spent his entire career to that point with the Memphis Grizzlies. By pairing Conley—a dynamic ball handler and good shooter who is adept at running the pick-and-roll—with their young stars Donovan Mitchell and Rudy Gobert, the Jazz thought they could contend for the NBA title. Things did not go as expected, as Conley started the 2019–2020 season with one of the worst stretches of his career.

Conley’s speed, intelligence, and skills have allowed him to consistently go toe-to-toe with (and often outperform) the best. But in a different basketball situation, the fine-tuned skills that allowed him to flourish on his previous team were less effective. His shot was not falling. His reads were tentative and off. He was, as the expression goes, thinking too much. As Michael Lee described it, “Conley’s timing is a tad off, mostly from overthinking how many extra dribbles he’ll need to set up a Gobert lob, whether to feed the hot hand or instill confidence in a teammate seeking to find a rhythm” (2019). When asked in December 2019 about his on-court struggles, Conley explained,

“I actually feel really good at this point. It’s not a matter of making shots or not making shots. That’s not the issue for me, especially early on. It’s being comfortable . . . Understanding when to be aggressive, how I can be effective with the lineup that we have. I’m so used to having the ball in my hands for so long. So it’s just an adjustment . . . You’re talking twelve years of the same habits, you’re trying to break.” (Lee, 2019)

Conley’s familiarity with his previous team’s system and teammates “removed much thought, allowing his instincts to take over whenever improvisation was in order” (Lee 2019). Developed over many hours of practice and game time, these instincts or “habits,” as Conley called them, involved the ability to see what a situation called for and the muscle memory to respond well. Conley’s on-court struggles involved habits in two ways: he needed to develop new habits for a new system and new teammates and to break old habits that no longer fit.

Conley is an elite basketball player seeking peak performance, but he illustrates a common phenomenon. We regularly acquire new habits (skills) and modify existing ones. And the same challenges Conley faces can occur whether we are seeking to learn to play the piano, improve as a surgeon, be more patient with others, or find better balance in one’s life. Our lives are filled with skillful, habitual actions, and the relevant habits and skills are acquired in various ways. Some are purposefully acquired; others are largely absorbed mostly unintentionally. Some habits fade without consistent care and practice; others stubbornly persist despite our best efforts. In short, even though our lives are filled with habits—some helping us more effectively navigate the world and others impairing our ability to do so—the nature of habit and the process by which we change habits are complex.

Many philosophers discuss habit, but as this volume attests, but their views on its value vary widely. Some think that (good) habits are crucial to the good life. Some see habit as an obstacle to robust human agency. Some see habit as an inevitable, if somewhat deficient, part of human existence. Because habit can be an ambiguous notion, some apparent disagreements about its nature or value may be more apparent than actual. But many see habit as occupying a middle ground between robust human action and mere physiological reflexes—even if habits seem partly agential, their automaticity can make them seem less agential than other actions.

For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, however, the middle ground habit occupies is a reason to elevate its status. On his account, habit (which he understands as motor skill) is not merely inevitable but is crucial to human existence. Consequently, understanding habit is integral to understanding human existence. Although Merleau-Ponty focuses on obviously bodily habits—such as athletic and musical performance—his work also illuminates qualities and characteristics such as kindness and patience. His accounts of habit and of how aspired-to skills and characteristics can become habitual, sinking into one’s muscle memory, naturally pair with recent work on aspiration, which Agnes Callard describes as the “agency of becoming.” However, the way habits become second nature is double-edged. Aspiration typically involves seeking to make certain actions habitual. But often, for aspired-to actions to become habitual, one must change one’s current (sometimes recalcitrant) habits. Thus, acquiring or changing one’s habits often involves significant conscious thought and effort.

Although Hubert Dreyfus’s influential interpretation of Merleau-Ponty consistently emphasizes the “mindless” or “thoughtless” nature of what he calls skillful coping, some think his interpretation goes too far and ultimately distorts both Merleau-Ponty’s view and the phenomenon of human action. For example, Komarine Romdenh-Romluc (2012, 2013) highlights problems with Dreyfus’s account and seeks to remedy the problems by offering a Merleau-Pontyan account of the role of thought in action. Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the conscious, effortful acts he calls “personal” (or “human”) acts and their relation to habit (or reflexes) lends support to this corrective, giving a clear place for conscious thoughts about what one is doing or, applied to aspiration, about who one is seeking to become. Not only do conscious thoughts often affect and guide one’s agency, but many habits begin as what Merleau-Ponty calls personal acts and, over time, become habitual. Personal acts often succeed by becoming “dormant” and continued “absent-mindedly” as reflex (Merleau-Ponty 90). In many cases, when personal acts become reflexive (or habitual), what Merleau-Ponty describes as “knowledge in our hands,” agents can more effectively navigate their practical environments. In the basketball example, Merleau-Ponty’s account explains how for Conley to excel in his new situation, he must develop new habits (and change some existing habits) so that he can better respond to what the basketball game solicits in his new environment.

This chapter begins by situating Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodied agency as a corrective to what some see as the overly intellectualistic tendencies of prominent accounts of agency (Section II). The bulk of the chapter then lays out Merleau-Ponty’s account of habit as part of his account of human agency (Section III). I close by describing the relationship between habit and personal acts and by connecting it to Callard’s work on aspiration (Section IV), discussing the role (and limits) of explicit thoughts about what we are doing and who we want to be (Section V). I argue that a Merleau-Pontyan account of habit, agency, and the relationship between personal acts and habit must walk a fine line, appropriately pushing back against the intellectualist tendencies that often predominate but without losing sight of the role of thought (and explicit intentions). Those inspired by Merleau-Ponty typically succeed on the first front, but often by making action thoughtless. I argue that while doing so is a mistake, it rightly highlights the essentially bodily nature of habit and human agency more broadly.

**II. Habit, Action, and Merleau-Ponty**

One reason for the unpredictable conceptual status of habit is that, in ordinary usage, habit can refer to multiple things. *Habit* can refer to (a) an addiction or compulsive inclination, (b) something one routinely does (e.g., drinking water after waking up, going for a run in the morning, or reading before falling asleep), or (c) “an acquired capacity or a disposition to deal with recurrent situations or tasks” (Capek 2017, 433).[[1]](#footnote-1) Although these senses can overlap, they are distinct. The capacity or disposition to brush one’s teeth (sense *c* above) is different from the mere routine of brushing one’s teeth before bed (sense *b* above), for example. And although acquired capacities and dispositions (sense *c*) usually seem agency-enhancing, addictions or compulsive inclinations (sense *a*) and even routine actions (sense *b*) can sometimes undermine robust human agency.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Much of the philosophy of action literature begins with the distinction between actions—things that one does, that express agency—and mere happenings in one’s life.[[3]](#footnote-3) Some things seem to be clearly actions—typing words, chopping onions, folding clothes, grading papers, and going for a run. Other things seem to be mere happenings, even when one’s body does them—digesting food, stumbling on a rug, and having muscle spasms. One common explanation for what sets actions apart from mere happenings is that actions are appropriately connected to the right “psychological item” or items (Pollard 2006, 58). This psychological item could be an intention, desire, belief, reason, or some combination of these. Two early proponents of this approach, Elizabeth Anscombe (1957) and Donald Davidson ([1971] 1980), argue that something is an action if it is intentional under some description.[[4]](#footnote-4) If the intention to type a word leads one to hit the right keys, then typing the word is an action.[[5]](#footnote-5) Although it seems clear that some actions involve psychological items like intentions, desires, or beliefs, some think that mental states being required in all actions leads to an overly intellectualistic picture that overlooks or distorts some instances of agency.

Some who find the dominant accounts of agency overly intellectualistic have found inspiration in Merleau-Ponty’s picture of a thoroughly embodied existence, one which leads him to rethink the nature of the body and contextualizes the intellectual faculties typically thought to be distinctive of human existence. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he concludes that careful attention to phenomena such as perception, temporality, and freedom shows that prevailing theoretical alternatives cannot capture important features of human existence without distortion. Antecedent theoretical commitments can impede one’s ability to see the phenomena clearly. An antecedent commitment to a highly intellectualist picture of human existence—for example, an (over)emphasis on the role of conscious intentions in actions—will lead one to distort phenomena or overlook contradicting features so that the phenomena will fit the theoretical framework. However, Merleau-Ponty thinks one goes too far in the other direction if human experience is reduced to mere physiological processes. If one characterizes actions as mere instinct or reflex, one distorts the skillful nature of the motor intentionality and overlooks how such intentionality is typically couched within broader intentions. In short, he argues that our being in the world is distorted if one treats it either “as a sum of reflexes” (the “physiological”) or as “an act of consciousness” (the “psychological” or the “psychical”). Because careful attention to the phenomena shows both approaches to be insufficiently attentive to the particularities of the phenomena they seek to explain, his analyses can appear to split the difference between the two approaches.

Habit is often seen as occupying a middle ground between robust actions and mere happenings, and so it is fitting that habit is central to Merleau-Ponty’s account of agency.[[6]](#footnote-6) In general when actions are described as habitual, it is to distinguish them from actions that involve explicit mental states, tacitly assuming that more robust actions involve intentions or something similar. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty sees habit as occupying a privileged position. In order to understand human existence, he believes, one must understand the body. And habits are often clearly (sometimes infuriatingly) bodily. The automatic nature of habit—including the way one can find oneself doing (or having done) things of which one was not fully aware—is one reason habits can seem less than fully agential.[[7]](#footnote-7) But Merleau-Ponty’s account of habit draws support from the fact that much of the time, the muscle memory of habit is a sign of hard-earned competence, even expertise, that allows one to fluidly respond to situations without explicit thoughts about what one is doing. One can drive home on “autopilot” only when one has the skills to maneuver a vehicle in very precise ways while one’s mind is directed elsewhere. Merleau-Ponty understands bodily skills and actions generally as responses to the world’s solicitations, the nature of which depends on the way the body is always situated in or interwoven with a world. Habits (bodily skills) affect how the world solicits one and how one can respond to those solicitations. Mike Conley’s bodily skills allow the world to solicit him to move to a particular space, make a specific pass, or take a shot, and allow him to respond well. Because Merleau-Ponty thinks this solicitational structure typically occurs prior to reflective awareness and, on some interpretations, without psychological elements such as intentions, desires, and beliefs, his account is seen as a response to what Bill Pollard describes as “the prevailing intellectualist philosophy of action” (2006, 57).

But even though Merleau-Ponty believes human agency is distorted when viewed through an overly intellectualist lens (by emphasizing mental states), it is a mistake to see him only as pushing against intellectualism. For one, when Merleau-Ponty discusses habit, he distinguishes it from automatic reflexes or physiological responses, such as when pupils dilate in response to low-light in one’s environment. To clarify: although *reflex* can refer to purely physiological responses to stimuli, Merleau-Ponty sometimes uses *reflexes* more synonymously with *habits*, in that they are acquired, are sensitive to the practical world, fall under one’s broader intentions, and involve what Pollard (2006) calls intervention control. In many cases, what begins as a personal or human act “becomes dormant and is continued absent-mindedly as a reflex” (90). The experienced birder instinctively spots birds in ways novices cannot, but that skill typically results from extended practice and is situated in her broader projects. Moreover, she can intervene and overcome instinct and avoid looking at a specific bird if the bird would find a direct look threatening. Conscious thoughts, then, often determine whether and how one acquires habits (motor skills) but can also influence whether and how habits are enacted. Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the relationship between personal acts and habits helps clarify his view of how mental states fit in human agency. That these mental states have a place at all, let alone a prominent one, goes against Dreyfus’s influential account of skillful (sometimes “mindless”) coping, a view he develops in his interpretation of Merleau-Ponty (see Romdenh-Romluc 2012, 2013). But there is also a risk of overcorrecting Dreyfus’s error and making Merleau-Ponty’s account more intellectualist than it is.

On Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodied agency, one’s projects polarize the world, making some possible acts more attractive and others more repulsive: “projects polarize the world, causing a thousand signs to appear there, as if by magic, that guide action, as signs in a museum guide the visitor” (115). Not all projects are explicitly thought, of course. But because some projects involve explicit thoughts, a truly Merleau-Pontyan account must avoid tendencies of the intellectualist tradition without under-appreciating the role of thought in human action. Too often, action in Merleau-Ponty’s account has been interpreted as “thoughtless,” as lacking mental states. But a proper understanding of the role of thought in action should not come at the expense of the strong bodily dimension of thought and of habit, which he describes as “knowledge in our hands.”

**III. Merleau-Ponty's Conception of Habit**

To see the nature of habit and, by extension, human existence clearly and without phenomenological distortion requires careful attention to the phenomena and a willingness to venture from the poles of intellectualism and scientistic reductionism. By describing habit as “knowledge in our hands,” Merleau-Ponty places it in a middle ground between knowledge and automatic reflexes (145). Again, for Merleau-Ponty, this middle ground is a privileged position. He thinks we distort much of human existence—including perception and action—if we over-intellectualize it and overplay the importance of mental states and or if we under-intellectualize it and reduce it to mere physiological reflexes. He does not reject the importance of the intellectual or the physiological. Rather, he believes that because human existence (being in the world) is an interweaving of the intellectual and the physiological, attempts to separate them will distort human experience. Habit figures prominently because, as knowledge in our hands, it paradigmatically illustrates this interweaving.

Skilled, habitual action has instinctive and reflexive elements, but it is different from mere instinct or reflex, such as when pupils dilate, in part because it is couched within and shaped by intentionality. Romdenh-Romluc (2012, 200) describes habits in the following way: “The ability to experience the world as soliciting her and respond accordingly is made possible by the agent’s motor skills—what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘habits.’ One acquires such skills through practice.” Until the sought-after skills become habit, related actions are often consciously (sometimes painfully) intentional. As one more fully acquires a habit, one typically can better see and respond to a situation’s solicitations without those responses being as conscious or intentional. But even when acquired habits allow for skillful responses without explicit thoughts and intentions, thoughts can still guide and influence habits. Thoughts can, for example, set parameters on whether and how to exercise habits. The skilled basketball player could take it easy when playing with her young child by suspending or altering habitual responses. Even if she sees opportunities to block a shot or drive past her defender, the salience of these solicitations can be altered by her broader aims and an explicit decision to play for fun. Of course, such changes in one’s skillful actions need not involve such thoughts. When the skilled pianist transitions from a Brahms lullaby to a Rachmaninoff concerto, adjustments in how she plays are not mere reflexes even if she does not articulate to herself the specific changes she is making. Given her projects and abilities, the world calls for certain responses, and her habits (bodily skills) allow her to respond well to those solicitations. When we have a habit a Merleau-Pontyan sense, the world can call for precise bodily responses and we have the relevant perceptual ability and motor skills to respond to those solicitations.

According to Merleau-Ponty, motor skills and perceptual experience are intertwined. So, when one acquires a habit (changing one’s motor skills), it changes one’s perceptual experience of the world. Because one primarily perceives the world in terms of solicitations to action and motor skills affect how the world can solicit one, so the way the world solicits one will depend on the motor skills one has and acquiring new habits can restructure one’s perception and engagement with the world. When Merleau-Ponty describes “acquiring a habit as the reworking and renewal of the body schema” (143), the body schema is not “merely an experience of my body, but rather an experience of my body in the world,” and the world is primarily a practical context (142). Whether one is learning how to drive a car or to type, learning a new dance or learning how to navigate the world with a cane or with a feather in one’s hat, to learn new bodily skills, to “catch” and “understand” some movement (144), is to change how one moves in the world.

Let us look at three key features of Merleau-Ponty’s account of habit:

1. *Incorporation*: habit (often) involves extending one’s body through the skillful use of instruments, that is, through incorporating instruments into one’s body.
2. *Spatiality*: acquired habits rework one’s existential spatiality.
3. *Bodily* *knowledge*: habit is neither mere reflex nor mere knowledge but involves both; as Merleau-Ponty puts it, habit is “knowledge in our hands” (145).

First, *incorporation*. Merleau-Ponty often talks about habit using examples of learning how to use or deal with instruments or objects—cars, feathers in hats, canes, and keyboards, for example. When one learns to use an instrument, one incorporates the instrument, or brings it into one’s body. This incorporation alters one’s bodily presence and capacities. As he puts it, “Habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments” (145). When one becomes adept at using some instrument, it becomes an extension of one’s body: “the subject who learns to type literally incorporates the space of the keyboard into his bodily space” (146). Incorporating instruments also expands one’s possibilities for action. Being able to drive a car, ride a bike, or play the piano changes what one can do. Again, because “every habit is simultaneously motor and perceptual” (153), acquiring habits (and incorporating instruments) changes how one perceives the world. He compares learning to perceive the world with a cane to a child learning to distinguish between blue and red, calling the gaze “a natural instrument comparable to the blind man’s cane” (154). To learn to see (new) colors is to acquire “a certain style of vision, a new use of one’s body” (155). Similarly, learning to see things in a new activity—patterns in chess, options in a basketball play, or different markings of bird species—is to acquire a new style of vision, one that affords a new use of one’s body. For Merleau-Ponty, however, the body is more than an object or instrument: “I am not in front of my body, I am in my body, or rather I am my body” (151), and that body is “an anchorage in a world” (146). My body anchors me and gives me a foothold in a fundamentally practical world, the shape of which depends on my tasks and projects.

Second, when Merleau-Ponty claims that acquiring a new habit is to rework one’s *spatiality*, the body’s spatiality is “situational spatiality” (102). In situational spatiality, when “here” is applied to my body, it situates my body in relation to its tasks rather than in relation to external coordinates (102–103).[[8]](#footnote-8) When one acquires habits by developing motor skills and incorporating instruments, it changes how one experiences the spatiality of one’s body and of the practical environment: the incorporated feathered hat and the automobile “become voluminous powers and the necessity of a certain free space” (144). They are powers in the ways they alter one’s spatial presence in the world and open up possibilities, but they also have an element of necessity because they set limits on how one can move. The hat requires one to duck through certain doorways and driving allows for faster speeds but also eliminates access to doorways or sidewalks. And one perceives the world accordingly. One with the habit (motor skills) for driving perceives roads and traffic primarily in terms of possibilities for action, and whether the spaces allow one to reach one’s aims.

One skilled with an instrument can adeptly navigate the situational spatiality of one’s environment. The person wearing the feathered hat and the driver size up their situations and respond without calculating the heights of the doorway in relation to the feathered hat or measuring the space between two cars on the highway. Habituation is less learning to apply theoretical knowledge and more developing bodily skill. Merleau-Ponty describes the process of learning how to use a cane in the following way:

If I want to become habituated to a cane, I try it out, I touch some objects and, after some time, I have it “in my hand”: I see which objects are “within reach” or out of reach of my cane. This has nothing to do with a quick estimate or a comparison between the objective length of the cane and the objective distance of the goal to be reached. Places in space are not defined as objective positions in relation to the objective position of my body, but rather they inscribe around us the variable reach of our intentions and our gestures. (144–145)

He extends this process to other instruments and connects the spatiality of one’s body to the process of incorporation: “To habituate oneself to a hat, an automobile, or a cane is to take up residence in them, or inversely, to make them participate within the voluminosity of one’s own body” (144–145). Habituation involves significant bodily know-how, a nuanced understanding and skill that, for example, allow one to perceive and navigate the world with a cane. When one skillfully inhabits an instrument, takes up residence in it, one’s being in the world dilates—the world affords new possibilities to one’s newly expanded body and one can respond to those possibilities. Some instruments extend one’s physical reach. But different and enhanced skills also expand one’s intentional reach by disclosing new possibilities and enabling novel responses to situations.

For one habituated to them, the hat and car are part of one’s body and thus open and close practical possibilities. One can and must navigate terrain differently while driving than while on foot. When the driver rotates her hands while holding the steering wheel, her whole body changes its orientation, and by pressing her foot on the gas pedal, her velocity increases. Ordinarily, the skilled driver does not perceive her body and environment in terms of a Cartesian coordinate system but in terms of progress toward her destination. And her primary experience of velocity is not in terms of numeric quantity but of her aim to arrive quickly at her destination, with the sense that she can press the gas to arrive more quickly. As instruments are incorporated into one’s body, the spatiality of those instruments, one’s body, and one’s environment change. Although it is easy to see in cases involving instruments, in general, one’s habits affect how one experiences the world and one’s own body.

Third, although Merleau-Ponty’s account of *bodily knowledge* has been interpreted as rejecting the intellect’s role in habit or skilled agency—and he does push back against the strong intellectualist strand in philosophy—one can easily swing too far in the other direction by cutting out the intellect entirely. While Merleau-Ponty has misgivings about reducing the motor skill of habit to a certain kind of knowledge, he also does not reduce skill to mere reflex. By saying that “habit [motor skill] is neither a form of knowledge nor an automatic reflex” (145), he resists both the intellectualist tendency to see habit (skill) as applied theoretical knowledge and the naturalist tendency to reduce habit (skill) to reflexes or instincts. But if habit is neither of these, what is it? “It is a question of knowledge in our hands,” he posits, something that “cannot be translated by an objective designation” (145). With the notion of bodily knowledge, Merleau-Ponty seeks to capture both the fluid and the skilled nature of habit without over- or under-emphasizing the role of the intellect. Perhaps because the predominant accounts of human agency are often intellectually demanding, accounts inspired by Merleau-Ponty can overcorrect by characterizing motor skills as skillful but explicitly thoughtless (or mindless) agency. While this interpretive approach rightly highlights that bodily knowledge is different from “knowledge,” it problematically downplays the knowledge aspect of bodily knowledge, including the role for thoughts and personal acts in acquiring and enacting bodily skills.

To show the distinctive nature of bodily knowledge and how such knowledge is distorted by other theoretical approaches, Merleau-Ponty uses the example of instrumentalists: “[they demonstrate] even more clearly how habit resides neither in thought nor in the objective body, but rather in the body as the mediator of the world” (146). Skilled instrumentalists show that the motor skill of habit cannot be adequately captured either by the intellectualist category of thought or the physiological or mechanistic understanding of reflex (the objective body). To show how neither approach captures the nature of such skill, he describes how a musician becomes accustomed to a new instrument.

[A]n experienced organist is capable of playing an organ with which he is unfamiliar and that has additional or fewer keyboards, and whose stops are differently arranged than the stops on his customary instrument. He needs but an hour of practice to be ready to execute his program. Such a brief apprenticeship prohibits the assumption that new conditioned reflexes are simply substituted for the already established collection, unless, that is, they together form a system and if the change is global, but this would be to go beyond the mechanistic theory since in that case the reactions would be mediated by a total hold on the instrument. Shall we say, then, that the organist analyzes the organ, that he forms and maintains a representation of the stops, pedals, and keyboards, as well as their relation in space? [No.] . . . [D]uring the short rehearsal that precedes the concert he hardly behaves like someone who wants to draw up a plan. He sits on the bench, engages the pedals, and pulls out the stops, he sizes up the instrument with his body, he incorporates its directions and dimensions, and he settles into the organ as one settles into a house. (146)

The organist’s preparation does not fit what he would (need to) do if the skill were reducible to conditioned reflexes or if it fundamentally depended on mental representations: the practice time is too brief for the former and his manner of rehearsal does not fit the latter. The organist settles into the new organ, incorporating it into his body and getting a feel for the spatiality it requires and makes possible. Once he gets a feel for the new instrument by practicing with it and adapting to its contours, the organist’s habit (motor skill) allows him to perform the music. The organ and the organist’s body become a place of passage between the musical essence of the piece in the score and the music that resonates around the organ (147). The body is an expressive space, and “during the rehearsal—just as during the performance—the stops, the pedals, and the keyboards are only presented to him as powers of such and such an emotional or musical value” (146–147). When he gives himself over to the music, the skilled instrumentalist responds bodily with the incorporated instrument to express the emotional or musical value of a piece. And in this immersed, expressive experience, “no sooner have I formed the desire to take hold of an object than already, at a point in space that I was not thinking about, my hand as that power for grasping rises up toward the object” (147). Because the motor skill of habit allows one to respond to the world’s solicitations in ways that harmonize with one’s desires before those desires become conscious thought, it is easy to see Merleau-Ponty’s account of “knowledge in our hands” as offering little to no role for thought in skilled human agency. The less-skilled instrumentalist needs to think through the piece; the skilled instrumentalist adjusts to a new instrument and plays masterfully without thinking about it. Similarly, Mike Conley’s play suffers when he thinks too much about what he is doing and improves when he finds himself passing or shooting just as the desire forms and before consciously settling on the action. Highly skilled individuals can respond well to situations before responses becomes conscious thought.

For these reasons, Merleau-Ponty consistently criticizes intellectualist approaches to perception and action. He rejects the idea that know-how depends on knowledge-that:

One can know how to type without knowing how to indicate where on the keyboard the letters that compose the words are located. Knowing how to type, then, is not the same as knowing the location of each letter on the keyboard, nor even having acquired a conditioned reflex for each letter that is triggered upon seeing it. (145)

Skillful typing is different both from knowing where each letter is on the keyboard and from mere reflex. Although typing when transcribing a page might seem to be a reflex triggered by letters on the page, Merleau-Ponty argues that thinking about habit in merely physiological ways also distorts the phenomenon. For one, habit involves holistic responses to one’s environment that are different from reflexive responses to stimuli. In addition, because the bodily skill of habit is integral to one’s being in the world and connected to projects that are shaped by one’s self-conception, Merleau-Ponty sees it as a mistake to separate habit from thought-infused acts that are often considered more paradigmatically agential.

Rather than undermining one’s agency, Merleau-Ponty sees habit as enhancing and as paradigmatic of human agency. As acquired capacities or dispositions, new habits open up new possibilities for pursuing one’s aims; they dilate one’s being-in-the-world. Learning the Fosbury flop significantly enhances the aspiring high jumper’s capacity to achieve her aims. In his essays on tennis and in the novel *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace describes the sheer volume of repetitious training required for one to develop the skill and muscle memory necessary to be even a mediocre professional tennis player. Significant habituation is necessary for high-level tennis because much of the game occurs too quickly for responses to be under one’s conscious control. However, if habit is merely reflex, this habituation could be seen as undermining agency. Insofar as consistent training leads the tennis player to see and respond to situational features or affordances that do not rise to her conscious attention, she could be guided by the situation more than by her conscious will. When the expert tennis player responds to situational forces by hitting the ball with a specific kind of spin, or sharply instead of slightly cross-court, the actions happen too quickly for the deliberation or conscious representation highlighted by intellectualism. As Wallace says in an essay on Roger Federer:

The upshot is that pro tennis involves intervals of time too brief for deliberate action. Temporally, we’re more in the operative range of reflexes, purely physical reactions that bypass conscious thought. And yet an effective return of serve depends on a large set of decisions and physical adjustments that are a whole lot more involved and intentional than blinking, jumping when startled, etc. (Wallace 2012: 23).

The skillful response to the situation involves a “the motor grasping of a motor signification” (144). This motor grasping enhances one’s agency, but it is neither reducible to rules nor mere reflex.

As mentioned, many seize on one piece of this picture and use Merleau-Ponty to push against the tendency to over-intellectualize human existence—including perception and agency—but it is an interpretive and philosophical mistake to fully remove thought from skilled action. One reason to resist making skilled action too thoughtless is that the habits embodied in expert performance typically come through a long process of conscious, thoughtful training. Of course, one could concede that thoughts often play important roles in habit (skill) acquisition yet still hold that once habits are acquired, such thoughts become unnecessary and can even undermine expert performance—thought plays a crucial role for the novice but not for the expert.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, habits can manifest differently depending on one’s conscious thoughts, including one’s self-conception and thoughts about one’s purposes. While thought-infused personal acts play important roles in habit acquisition, how one exercises one’s habits (skills) often depends on one’s conscious thoughts. This happens in new circumstances with unfamiliar parameters or when one is working to change a habit. I may habitually look for cars before crossing the street but need to consciously adjust this habit when visiting a city where cars and buses drive on a different side of the road. Even though Merleau-Ponty pushes against the preeminent place of thought and emphasizes the bodily nature of agency, he affirms that thought can play an important role.

**IV. Personal Acts, Habit, and Aspiration**

To better see both the importance and the limits of thought, let us turn to the phenomenon of aspiration, which Callard describes as the agency of becoming. Although Callard has a very specific phenomenon in mind and I use aspiration in a broader sense, Merleau-Ponty’s account of habit illuminates the process of aspiration (in both narrower and broader senses). When we aspire, we want to acquire new habits or ways of being. Often, aspiration also involves shedding or significantly changing habits. And to change such habits is to unlearn previously acquired bodily dispositions. Mike Conley had been an excellent basketball player at every level. But in a different basketball system, the habits (skills) that once allowed him to thrive now tripped him up. Relying on instinct often led to the wrong play. But thinking about making the right play in the new system also undermined his motor skills—he shot worse, made bad passes, and so forth. To succeed on his new team, Conley needed both to learn new habits and to unlearn (or change) old habits. When discussing motor skills (habits), Merleau-Ponty and others in the phenomenological tradition (such as Dreyfus) use examples from athletics, music, and other obviously bodily activities, such as typing or driving. But Merleau-Ponty’s expansive conception of habit and the way he emphasizes the embodied nature of human experience (and agency) could extend to aspiration (broadly construed) in other areas—including aspiring to be kinder, to stand one’s ground, and to find balance in life.

Aspiration involves more than wanting to act in certain ways; when one aspires, one wants to become a certain type of person. For Callard, because one’s values constitute one’s deep practical orientation, aspiration is the “distinctive form of agency directed at the acquisition of values” (Callard 4–5). To change one’s values is to bring about profound changes in oneself (33). In the phenomenological tradition, one changes in this way by developing the dispositions, attributes, and skills to see the world in a certain way and seamlessly, skillfully respond to situations. Some such changes come suddenly—some religious conversions, for example. But most are gradual and work-intensive—developing character traits or coming to act in keeping with a commitment to gender or racial equality. Becoming a parent can be a hybrid case. Having a child can shake up one’s world, but “it does not magically endow one with the values, habits, and feelings of parenthood” (Callard 2018, 60). To become a parent in the deep practical orientation sense involves a change in one’s values, habits, and feelings, in one’s being in the world.

Becoming a skilled athlete or musician involves developing the perception and muscle memory that allow one to see what a situation requires and respond well, whether one is returning a tennis volley or playing a concerto. Similarly, when one aspires to be kind, one does not seek merely to acquire the beliefs or outward movements of a kind person; one wants to become kind, to see and respond to the world in a kind way. No matter who or what one wants to become, one must develop the right habits (skills), including the relevant perceptual orientation.

Of course, habits are acquired differently. Some are acquired passively without conscious effort, perhaps through upbringing or enculturation. But others are actively acquired through intensive learning and training until they become second nature. Learning a new instrument or a new piece of music typically involves focused, intentional practice. Over time and with significant repetition, what once required intense concentration can become second nature. Similarly, when one tries to be a better parent, considering those relationships and working to develop parenting skills can help one become more attuned to the world as a parent and better able to respond well. But if one aspires to *become* and not merely act in certain ways, conscious effort and deliberate practice are important primarily because they help dispositions and skills to become muscle memory.

Recall Merleau-Ponty’s poetic claim that one’s projects “polarize the world, causing a thousand signs to appear there, as if by magic, that guide action, as signs in a museum guide the visitor” (115). The different ways projects like parenthood can polarize the world are worthy of attention. To some extent, genuinely adopting a project already changes how one’s world is polarized. But the polarization at that point is likely effortful and partial. Because one does not yet have the habits (bodily skills) that would more fully polarize one’s world and allow one to fully inhabit that world, one is *working* to see and respond to the world in a certain way. Early aspiration is thus often characterized by effortful, conscious personal acts. As aspiration succeeds, the personal acts become habit, and one sees and responds to the world differently.

Aspiration thus involves two dimensions of human action. Personal acts and thoughts about one’s aims involve the capacity for conscious thought and reflection. But to genuinely aspire is to seek to change one’s habits and one’s being in the world. Merleau-Ponty highlights the bodily dimension of this transition: “even if our body does not impose definite instincts upon us from birth, as the animal’s body does, then it at least gives the form of generality to our life and prolongs our personal acts into stable dispositions” (147). Viewed from a certain perspective, when something becomes habit, one relinquishes some conscious control.[[10]](#footnote-10) While developing a habit gives stability and consistency to a personal act that one wants to be more fully integrated into one’s way of being, it is no longer continually under one’s conscious control. And this is double-edged. It makes possible masterful performance that occurs too quickly for full control by explicit thoughts, but it also allows one to be moved by habits that one wishes were no longer effective.

Because personal acts do not exhaust one’s habits or existential projects, the world can be shaped by habits and polarized by projects of which one is unaware, that one wishes one did not have, that one denies having, or that one is working to change. Framing things in terms of Callard’s conception of value, one can find oneself valuing things or in ways one wishes one did not. When this happens, personal acts can help change one’s habits and ways of seeing the world, and thoughts about one’s aims and projects can help change one’s practical situation. Romdenh-Romluc (2012, 211–212) proposes a Merleau-Pontyan account of how thoughts can affect the salience or strength of solicitations. For one arriving late to a lecture hall, the desire to slip in unnoticed and the memory of a squeaky floorboard can strengthen the solicitation to avoid that floorboard. Or one aspires to be kinder and consistently thinks kindness and how to be kinder might plan for and notice opportunities to be kind; kind actions could come to solicit one more strongly and unkind actions could become repulsive. Genuine aspiration can lead one to think about possibilities for action and affect the salience of solicitations, thus affecting how the world appears to one, even before one more fully acquires the aspired-to habits. But in both cases just described, these people do not yet have the relevant habits as fully as they would like. Romdenh-Romluc’s late lecture hall arriver needs to think to himself to avoid the squeaky floorboard because he does not yet have the habit (the perceptual and motor skills) to spontaneously avoid it; the kindness aspirant has to think about what a kind person would do because her kindness habits are underdeveloped. In a Merleau-Pontyan framework, the goal of aspiration is to develop the habits that allow one to live differently, and this involves a more lasting change in the world’s polarization and the strength of the solicitations.

Near the end of his first season with his new team, things started improving for Conley. In his second season with the Jazz, Conley was playing arguably the best basketball of his career. As Tony Jones puts it:

What’s obvious is Conley has a much better grasp of the offense in Year 2. And the understanding of the offense has allowed him to get back instinctually to what he does best. Conley has always been great at running pick and roll, finding open shots for himself, or getting into the paint and dissecting a defense. (Jones, 2021)

Jones’s characterization softens the fact that Conley was not great at those things for much of the previous season. His habits were in a time of transition. Jazz coach Quin Snyder described it in a way Merleau-Ponty would likely approve of: “‘He’s been able to be more instinctive. . . . Things take time, and that’s important to remember’” (Jones 2021). By being able to rely on habits and instincts again, Conley became an All Star for the first time in his career. The Merleau-Pontyan point, however, is not that conscious thought or aspiration has no place. Such thought plays an important role in developing and modifying habits and in framing the context within which habits are exercised. What starts as a personal act can in time become habit, and then as one engages with the world, those habits can be refined and modified to better respond to the nuances of the situations one encounters. In some cases, those modifications are the result of conscious thought. Even fully developed habits are often still tied up with personal acts and the capacity for conscious thoughts. But for Merleau-Ponty, thought does not enjoy the conceptual pride of place it often does.

Take, for example, how he describes the entanglement of personal acts and reflex (habits) in the context of a discussion of human existence more generally:

Taken concretely, man is not a psyche joined to an organism, but rather this back-and-forth of existence that sometimes allows itself to exist as a body and sometimes carries itself into personal acts. Psychological motives and bodily events can overlap because there is no single movement in a living body that is an absolute accident with regard to psychical intentions and no single psychical act that has not found at least its germ or its general outline in physiological dispositions. It is never a question of the incomprehensible encounter of two causalities, nor of a collision between the order of causes and the order of ends. Rather, through an imperceptible shift, an organic process opens up into a human behavior, an instinctive act turns back upon itself and becomes an emotion, or, inversely, a human act becomes dormant and is continued absentmindedly as a reflex. The psychical and the physiological can be related through exchanges that prevent almost every attempt to define a mental disturbance as either psychic *or* somatic. (90)

In this back-and-forth that characterizes human existence, we sometimes engage in personal acts, consciously thinking about and pursuing an outcome. Yet, some personal acts aim at acquiring habits that change our way of being—what start as personal acts can become habits that allow us to exist bodily with conscious psychological motives figuring less prominently. However, we are never fully (or merely) either a psyche or an organism but a to-and-fro of existence that swings between and intermingles these. Thus, even the headiest activities are bodily and not merely psychical and, alternatively, even the most bodily actions occur against the background of conceptual frameworks and can be infused with the reflective thought often seen as central to human existence. To over- or under-emphasize either side is to lose sight of what makes us the distinctive beings we are.

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Abstract: In *Aspiration*, Agnes Callard examines the phenomenon of aspiration, the process by which one acquires values and becomes a certain kind of person. Aspiring to become a certain type of person involves more than wanting to act in certain ways. We want to come to see the world in a certain way and to develop the dispositions, attributes, and skills that allow us to seamlessly and effectively respond to situations. The skilled athlete or musician, for example, has developed the muscle memory and the perceptual equivalent to naturally see what a situation requires and to respond well, whether playing a Rachmaninoff concerto or returning a tennis volley.

I use Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* to flesh out the process of becoming, through which aspired-to values, skills, and characteristics become part of one’s embodied being-in-the-world. Although some rightly focus on Merleau-Ponty’s efforts to avoid over-intellectualizing skillful action, without appreciating his distinction between habitual actions and human (or personal) acts, we overlook an important aspect of robust human agency—the way “a human act becomes dormant and is continued absent-mindedly as a reflex” (90). Merleau-Ponty’s account of habit and its relation to personal acts offers a rich and phenomenologically sensitive picture of aspiration.

1. Jakub Capek (2017) describes four different senses of habit, adding one to those mentioned above: habit as “the mere habituation to something, as when we become used to a new climate after having moved” (433). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Callard’s (164–166) discussion of Donald Davidson’s discussion of the habitual pre-bedtime toothbrusher. Also, Pollard (2006) notes that *habit* can be understood as addiction, compulsion, or phobia, which all seem to compromise agency. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Donald Davidson and Harry Frankfurt begin “Agency” and “Identification and Externality,” respectively, with this distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In “Habit and Attention” (2013) and “Thought in Action” (2012), Romdenh-Romluc calls this approach the dominant view. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Because actions can be described differently, something can be an action if it is intentional under one description, even if it is not intentional under another. For example, hurting my colleague’s feelings could be an action if I intentionally make a hurtful remark about her, even if my intention is not to hurt her feelings (I could make the comment to someone else and not intend for her to overhear). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Describing Merleau-Ponty’s account of perception, Taylor Carman (2020, 76) writes: “Perception is irreducibly intentional and bodily, sensory and motor, and so neither merely subjective nor objective, inner nor outer, spiritual nor mechanical. The middle ground between those traditional categories is not just their middle but indeed their ground, for it is what they depend on and presuppose.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Not all think this. Pollard (2003) and Julia Peters (2015) argue that habitual automaticity is constitutive of truly virtuous actions. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On Merleau-Ponty’s account, practical or situational spatiality is phenomenologically prior to objective spatiality. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dreyfus’s (2014) account of skill acquisition goes this way (see, for example, “From Socrates to Expert Systems” in *Skillful Coping*). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. To be clear, to have something become habit is not to entirely cede control of the action. As Bill Pollard (2006) suggests, one thing that distinguishes habits from (mere) reflexes is that one can guide and intervene in habitual actions in a way that one cannot with mere physiological reflexes. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)