Habit, Autonomy, and Ableism

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This paper is oriented around a fairly basic question: are our habits good or bad for our autonomy? Do they free us, or lock us into unthinking forms of ignorance? The obvious initial answer is probably, a little bit of both, depending on the context – but to stop there would make for a very short paper.

I’m interested, then, in poking around at what habits do, and what our expectations are. I’m interested as well in the notion that disrupting habits – often bad habits, but also maybe habits in general – is a good thing, insofar as it provokes a fresh and authentic encounter with the world. Is it always good? Is it unproblematically good? Is there a certain privilege in invoking the goodness of habit disruption?

For the purposes of this paper, the particular account of autonomy that I will be assuming is largely drawn from Diana Meyers. It is a relational account of autonomy that focuses less on a binary determination of autonomy (is someone autonomous with respect to a particular decision or action) and more on the ways and means by which someone’s autonomy competency can be cultivated and enhanced versus diminished or stifled. Autonomy competency involves a range of skills and abilities (affective, cognitive, embodied) that allow us determine ourselves and define ourselves wisely and well (Meyers 2000, 166-168), such that “one’s autonomy is a function both of one’s overall level of facility with respect to autonomy competency and of how successfully one uses these skills on any given occasion—success being gauged by affective and visceral commentary” (Meyers 2004, 70). This competency is developed and made proficient through practice and experience over a lifetime (Meyers 2000, 175).

We don’t need to be wedded to the particular details of Meyers’ theory— I just want to ensure that we have in mind this kind of notion of autonomy: something that can flourish or not, based partly on our own skill-development and partly on our context. A key thing here is that the skills in question are ones that work for us, as we figure them out over a lifetime, not as measured against an idealised notion of humanity.

The other thing I’m going to assume for now – rather than go into detail about – is that the embracing and acceptance of our vulnerability is fully compatible with autonomy as relational: it enhances self-awareness, helps us to assess our values, goals, and commitments, and attunes us to our interdependence. This position draws on work from a range of figures, and I’m happy to discuss it later.¹

¹ I discuss this in much more detail in a current book project; for a sketch of the argument of the interrelation between vulnerability and autonomy, see my 2013 conference paper, “Vulnerability, Autonomy, Disability,” available on my website: janedryden.weebly.com/research.
I’m going to launch into Hegel now for a tiny bit to explore what habits are and what they mean for us; we could probably tell a fairly similar story using Aristotle or virtue ethics, but Hegel is who I habitually reach for, so here we are.

Hegel discusses habits in the Anthropology section of the Philosophy of Spirit, the third part of his Encyclopaedia. The Anthropology is concerned with those determinations of the human being that we are not yet fully conscious of, but that affect our way of being in the world. It includes things like climate, and age (stage of life), and temperament. Habit is at the very end, right as we’re about to start becoming conscious of ourselves, but haven’t quite yet gotten there. This of course makes sense, since our habits (once formed) are largely beneath our conscious awareness, but we can choose to turn our attention to them, given some impetus. So they occupy a kind of liminal space.

Our habits are the way by which our not-yet-conscious self comes to be in possession of itself, of its body; Hegel describes this kind of possession carefully: in the determinations of habit the soul “is not actually sentient, it does not stand in a relationship to them by distinguishing itself from them, nor is it absorbed into them, but it has them in itself and moves in them, without sensation or consciousness” (PM §410).

Hegel points out that we need habits in order to navigate the world, and endorses their description as a second nature (PM §410R). He classifies them into three forms: indifference to immediate sensation (for example, being used to the cold, or used to the humidity); indifference toward satisfaction (the habit of being able to delay our urges); and dexterity.

All three contribute to our freedom; as Hegel notes, “The essential determination is the liberation from sensations that man gains through habit, when he is affected by them” (PM §401R).

The existence of our habits frees us up for conscious reflection on other things: I can think about what I’m going to say in this paper while I’m making coffee, without having to attend too carefully on the details of grinding the beans or the order of what goes into the bodum first.

Not only do habits liberate us, but they are also part of what makes us who we are. The development of our habits shapes us as individuals. As Hegel remarks, while “habit is often spoken of disparagingly,” “habit is the most essential feature of the existence of all mental life in the individual subject, enabling the subject to be concrete immediacy, to be soulful ideality, enabling the content, religious content, moral content, etc., to belong to it as this self, as this soul, not in it merely implicitly (as predispositions), nor as a transient sensation or representation, nor as abstract inwardness, cut off from action and actuality, but in its very being” (PM §410R). Habit is how my body and my way of life become mine. He describes it as a “magical relationship” in which the body becomes “more and more at home in its expressions” (PM §410Z [136]).

From his 1827-8 lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit: “It is my universal mode of being – what I am is the totality of my habits. I can do nothing else, I am this.” (LPS, 153).
In sum (going back to the *Philosophy of Spirit*): habit is “this being-together-with-one’s-own-self” (PM §410Z [134]).

But Hegel also points out something else that we know about habits: they can seem to trap us.

As he notes, “Therefore although on the one hand, by habit a man becomes free, yet, on the other hand, habit makes him its *slave*” (PM §410Z [134]). Being determined by habit and thus in a way unfree is not the worst thing, though, since Hegel notes that: “The unfreedom in habit is partly just *formal*, pertaining only to the being of the soul; partly only *relative*, in so far as it really arises only in the case of *bad* habits, or in so far as a habit is opposed by another purpose; the habit of right in general, of the ethical, has the content of freedom” (PM §410R).

In other words, it is not primarily regarding the fact of being determined, or unfree, that we should worry about with habits. Rather, there is a larger problem.

Much as it is liberatory, via habits, to be freed from sensation, Hegel notes that we develop through opposition. Being too comfortable in our habits, thus, removes the impetus for living. This largely occurs during the phase of old age, as Hegel describes in both the *Philosophy of Nature* and in the *Anthropology*. It’s worth quoting in full from the *Anthropology*:

> The old man lives without any definite interest, for he has abandoned the hope of actualizing the ideals he cherished earlier and the future seems to promise him nothing new at all; on the contrary, he believes that he already knows the universal, the essential in anything he may still encounter … he firmly retains in his mind the wise teachings of experience and feels obliged to preach to those younger than himself. But this wisdom, this lifeless, complete coincidence of subjective activity with its world, leads back to oppositionless childhood, in the same way that the growth of the activity of his physical organism into a static habit leads on to the abstract negation of the living individuality, death (PM §396Z [61]).

Somehow it seems as though it would be good to shake us out of these ruts.

Ami Harbin points out the awareness that comes from bodily disorientation, disruption of our habits, and argues that “*experiences of bodily disorientation can strengthen the moral agency of* ...

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2 The version in the *Philosophy of Nature* runs as follows: “In life, the animal maintains itself, it is true, against its non-organic nature and its genus; but its genus, as the universal, in the end retains the upper hand. The living being, as a singular, dies from the habit of life, in that it lives itself into its body, into its reality … for since vitality is a process, opposition is necessary to it, and now the other which it should have had to overcome is for it no longer an other… Just as in the spiritual sphere, old people dwell more and more within themselves and their kind, and their general ideas and conceptions tend to occupy their interest to the exclusion of what is particular, with the result that tension, *interest* falls away and they are contented in this processless habit; so, too, it is in the physical sphere. The absence of opposition to which the organism progresses is the repose of the dead; and this repose of death overcomes the inadequacy of disease, this inadequacy being therefore the primary cause of death” (PN §375 Z [442]).
Disorientation can cause us to attend and reflect on our relationality, our vulnerability, our limited resources, and the need for political action (Harbin 2012, 271). She gives examples drawn from illness, disability, oppression, bodily transformation, and trauma (taking care to note that not all disorientation is traumatic and harmful (Harbin 2012, 271).

Harbin briefly notes in her conclusion that “disrupted embodiment is not always helpful” (Harbin 2012, 17), and it is this last point that I want to explore in more depth. I wonder about the different kinds of disruption of habit, and the difference that such disruption makes to different people in different contexts. Who needs this disruption and the lessons it teaches? Who is differentially harmed by such disruption? In other words: what are the circumstances in which disruption or interruption of habit allows autonomy to flourish, vs. when is it stifled by such disruption?

Erinn Gilson, in a paper on the relationship between epistemologies of ignorance and vulnerability, points out that in general a denial of our own vulnerability is wrapped up in an ignorance of our own interrelations with others and a desire for mastery. She argues that denial of vulnerability is accompanied by a great deal of social and political privilege, and that in general it would be laudable for us to try to overcome our privileged ignorance by practicing epistemic vulnerability -- by deliberately exposing ourselves and putting ourselves in positions where we do not know everything, where we are not in control of the situation – “without an acceptance of the genuine value of discomfort and the real necessity of immersing oneself in situations in which one does not normally find oneself, learning does not happen” (Gilson 2011, 324-6). Doing so equates more or less to deliberate disorientation of the kind that Harbin describes as enhancing our moral agency.

What’s worth noting for our purposes is a section of Gilson’s paper where she points out the need for some people, in some situations, to practice “strategic invulnerability.” For those who have lacked privilege, for those who have been struggling, embracing their vulnerability may not in all instances be the right move (Gilson 2011, 322-3). Here, it may be wiser to maintain a “protective stance” against “violence, against economic vulnerability …, against the emotional vulnerability that comes with an inferiorized position” (Gilson 2011, 323). This form of closure “is not constitutive but selective and strategic; one does not ignore and deny vulnerability per se, but refuses the experience of vulnerability in particular cases” (Gilson 2011, 323).

Gilson recognizes the differential ways in which vulnerability is experienced and thus the different positions by which someone might approach epistemic vulnerability.

On a similar note, it seems as though we might want to bring a similar kind of awareness of difference to the discussion of habit. Disorientation and disruption of habit is good (and autonomy-enhancing) for some people in some circumstances in some contexts, and these are going to depend on both individual and social/political determinations.

So we might talk about strategic habit preservation.
In discussing strategic invulnerability, Gilson argues that we can differentiate between strategic invulnerability and the bad kind of pernicious vulnerability at least in part through their epistemic character:

In seeking to deal with and prevent one’s vulnerability from being exploited, one must know why and in what ways one is vulnerable, and how and why one seeks to neutralize this particular form of vulnerability. This refusal of vulnerability and certain forms of relationality thus requires knowledge instead of precluding and suppressing it (Gilson 2011, 323).

Bringing such a differentiator into the notion of strategic habit preservation may seem strange insofar as our habits are generally beneath the level of our conscious awareness – we do not engage in regular self-reflection on our habits once they are formed. However, we could, and often we have. Habits that are formed as the result of a struggle or opposition, I suggest, are earned: it is not necessary to disrupt them just for the same of coming to appreciate our vulnerability – that lesson has already been learned.

Similarly, habits formed by non-normative agents may already be sufficiently different, already stand out sufficiently, that disrupting them, instead of enhancing moral agency and autonomy, may diminish or stifle it by provoking shame, frustration, and so on. (“Hey look, you have a different way of walking!” – is this useful to anyone? Similarly, it seems clear that the habits of learning how to relate to pain developed by those with chronic pain or learning how to manage chronic illnesses are hard-won – the development and negotiation of these already occasions its own reflections, even if they are not fully articulated.)

An interesting example to consider at length is stimming by autistic people. Short for self-stimulation, stimming refers to a range of repetitive body movements, including flapping hands, rocking, twirling hair, babbling, or chewing objects (Lindsmith 2014). Stimming can help release pressure, or help focus and block out overwhelming sensory experiences. Stimming basically becomes a habit – it soothes, it feels good, and so it makes sense to do it regularly. Kirsten Lindsmith writes: “Stimming is a valuable tool for autistics to self-regulate, self-sooth, and gain familiarity and control over their bodies and environments.”

(It is tempting to figure out where exactly in Hegel’s classification of habits stimming might fit; the closest fit might be the practice of becoming more hardened to sensation, by blocking excessive sensory experience, but insofar as it often involves full body movements, it might be part of the development of the dexterity of our bodies, a training of the bodies to help regulate our feelings and experiences. Certainly, it seems to help one feel at home in the body.)

Some of these are easier to pass with – biting fingernails, for instance, is fairly common amongst neurotypical people – and some, such as full-body rocking, are harder. As Lindsmith writes, some are maybe better saved for the bathroom (Lindsmith 2014). She suggests that it might be helpful for some children to watch themselves “stim in the mirror, and divide stims into public or private” (Lindsmith 2014). This does not involve disorientation but rather a shift of attention to the habit. But, she notes, this is not possible for everyone—and further, the problem at hand is not the stim. As Cynthia Kim writes in her blog, Musings of an Aspie, if the problem with “socially inappropriate” stims is that “people will stare” –
then who has the problem? (Kim 2013). If part of what stimming is doing is soothing anxiety or reducing sensory overload, attempting to disrupt or stop it is likely to make things worse. And in fact, if we think of autonomy involving competencies and skills for self-determination and self-definition, then the acquired habits – such as stims – used for refocusing and soothing ourselves seem important aspects of that autonomy.

So, it seems as though it is useful to be **reflective** about these habits and the role that they play, but not to **disrupt** them just for the sake of engendering that reflection.

The kind of habits that Hegel believes are worst for us are those that eliminate any kind of experience of opposition or friction with the world; those habits that enable people to bring an overwhelming world to a level that they can cope with are clearly not of that ilk. The habits borne out of this kind of engagement with the world ought to be respected. They are the tools and means by which an agent has been able to get on in the world, in a world in which they may not easily fit.

Similarly, we would also say that deliberately trying to disrupt the habits that a person has developed in order to cope with the world is be paternalistic and disruptive to their autonomy, insofar as it involves forcing a different set of skills on someone in the name of promoting self-definition.

Can we still make sense of **bad habits**, on this account? Well, we need to be careful. Is a bad habit bad because it seems to go against able-bodied and able-minded assumptions about how bodies and minds should move through the world? Or is it bad insofar as it seems to run against the agent’s own autonomous desires? Are we isolating the problem with the habit in the agent, or in the fit with the agent’s habitual action and the assumptions and habits of others? The insights of the disability rights movement’s social model, in which disability is not located in the individual but in the relationship between that individual and an oppressive social context, are salient in the understanding of which habits are to be considered **bad**.

In the case of stimming, physically harmful activity is probably worth learning to avoid (though we might also look at the contexts of those stims); but gauging stims by virtue of their normalcy is problematic. Stopping a stim is disorienting, but not in a way that enhances moral agency.

As Lindsmith notes, when parents ask about stopping their children’s stims, they **mean** well in terms of their children’s autonomy: “They imagine with dread their child’s future job interviews, dates, and college classes with people who equate stimming with ‘unstable’ and ‘crazy.’ They just want to know if there’s anything that can be done to make their children a little more socially acceptable, and their lives a little easier” (Lindsmith 2014).

Disrupting habits in the name of normalization may appear, on the surface, to bring an agent closer to the liberal ideal of the independent individual, but works against the genuine development of that agent’s ability to flourish on their own terms, with their own developed responses, strategies, and competencies. Habits can allow agents to work with and through their vulnerability, making it possible to reconcile themselves to it without being overcome.
When we talk about the role of habits, and the virtues of embracing our vulnerability, it is important to ask whose habits, habits developed in reaction to what circumstances, and to remember that the flourishing of autonomous agency does not look the same for all agents.

Works Cited

Hegel texts:


Other texts:


