

Habits of Transformation

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*This essay argues that according to feminist existential phenomenology, feminist pragmatism, and feminist genealogy, our embodied condition is an important starting place for ethical living due to the inevitable role that habits play in our conduct. In bodies, the phenomenon of habit uniquely holds together the ambiguities of freedom and determinism, transcendence and immanence, and stability and plasticity. Seeing habit formation as a matter of self-growth and social justice gives fresh opportunity for thinking of “assuming ambiguity” as a lifelong endeavor made up of many small projects and practices of situated resistance to stagnation. Transcendence, understood as ameliorative transformation, is found in cultivating habits of learning from our bodily living. I articulate this argument via a reading of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age*, John Dewey’s *Human Nature and Conduct*, and Ladelle McWhorter’s *Bodies and Pleasures*. I discuss two domains wherein the ethical significance of habit formation appears: cognitive psychological research on neural plasticity, and certain projects of self-cultivation that risk turning into overdetermining “cult of the self” practices that close off possibilities for personal and collective transformation.*

Ethical living, thought as conduct and care for self and others, is importantly “embodied” in at least two broad senses: *neurobiologically*, in the patterns and connections through which experience structures our concepts, actions, and abilities; and *experientially*, as the enacted practices that constitute our daily being. Varieties of embodiment—cognitive, linguistic, phenomenologically experiential—are of course intimately related. In multiple ways and at multiple levels, our embodied practices form us; they constrain and enable us; they cultivate and activate habits. If habits are significant conditions for our conduct, then the potential for good living lies precisely in the cultivation of certain kinds of habits. This claim falls in with the major trend in normative ethics that emphasizes a return to the Aristotelian model of *arête*, in which education

and praxis build a virtuous character that is able to find the mean in a variety of situations.¹ Our embodiment conditions the possibility of virtue ethics insofar as it conditions habit formation and deployment. As I'll argue, habits of openness and transformation enable ethical living on an existentialist-pragmatist model of freedom and possibility; furthermore, forming these habits is a fully embodied process in a robust sense that includes neural maps as well as routine social engagements with the world. As embodied, languaged, and self-conscious creatures, we can reflect on our activities, ask ourselves which virtues we are cultivating, feel orientation toward values, and revise the direction of our growth.

From *Pyrrhus and Cineas* through *The Coming of Age*, I find significant parallels between Beauvoir's ethical guideword of *ambiguity* and ethical goal of *situated freedom* and John Dewey's guidewords of *indeterminacy* and *flexibility* and goal of *growth* or *proliferation of possibilities*. Dewey's pragmatism teaches that moral conduct is a matter of flexible habit, and we cannot think of habits without paying attention to development and learning. Self-care practices capitalize on the contingent and temporal nature of habit cultivation. Drawing particularly on the *feminist* inflections found in phenomenological existentialism, pragmatism, and genealogy facilitates a convergence of these three philosophical traditions on an ethically oriented treatment of embodiment. An under-noticed example of this thinking is found in *The Coming of Age*, wherein Beauvoir closely considers how temporality and freedom are lived differently as aging brings sedimentation and social displacement (Beauvoir 1972).² Much like the case of feminine-gendered embodiment, senescence is a special site of ethical possibility due to the weight that's added to the daily struggle of transcending one's facticity. In old age there is an imbalance of life accumulated compared with life left to take up and shape. Beauvoir finds the notion of *habit* useful here: what kind of habits are desirable when, on balance, we have more already-cultivated habits than chances to cultivate new ones, and time for transcendence is short? Embodied habits, materially rooted in the past and open to alteration in the future, transform the antinomies of freedom and determinism, transcendence and immanence, and stability and plasticity into lived ambiguities. If habits are experienced as lived ambiguities capable of ameliorative transformation, then conscious habit cultivation offers a situated practice of resistance to stagnation. Indeed, the formation of habits that are ameliorable to transformation may be seen as an ethical practice of openness and as crucial to the pursuit of justice as understood by Beauvoir and Dewey.

The article develops this argument as follows. In the first section, I present Dewey's rich notion of habit, employing feminist pragmatist Shannon Sullivan's reading of Dewey to emphasize the transactional, embodied, and ethical nature of habits. I review Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist ethics, particularly her core ideas of situated freedom and ambiguity, in terms of their

potential correspondence with a pragmatist focus on organism—environment interaction. In the second section, I consider Beauvoir's writings on habit in *The Coming of Age* in dialogue with recent psychological research on neural plasticity and successful aging. Although I read Beauvoir's prescriptions for aging well to require the development of flexible habits in the Deweyan sense, both accounts are underdetermined when it comes to how this development takes place. Therefore, in the final section, I introduce Ladelle McWhorter's genealogical feminism to provide examples of embodied self work and to heighten our attunement to the necessarily open-ended nature of truly transformative habits.

I

In *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey finds *habit* and *impulse* operating in all aspects of our moral lives. Shannon Sullivan, following Dewey in thinking of our always environed, responsive and relational being as *transactional*, describes his notion of habit as ethical:

Dewey's particular illumination of the role of habit is crucial to a feminist understanding of the gendering of human bodies, and thus of human selves. Dewey develops an explicit account not only of the formation but also of the possible transformation of individual habit. The explicit and strong emphasis on improvement, rather than mere description, in Dewey's understanding of habit is one reason why it attends . . . effectively to the transaction between the body and the world. . . . (Sullivan 2001, 92)

In *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey describes habit as *physiological function*: a pattern of an organism in interaction with its environment. A habit is an incorporation of the objective environment into an organism's behavior and being. Habits as *arts* require skill, craft, and materials. Dewey writes that habit is *will*; it has power over us “because we are the habit” (Dewey 1988, 21). Habit's power as will is dual: as an enabling condition and as a source of agency. As Sullivan writes, “I know how to be a woman because of the bodily habits that I am” (Sullivan 2001, 93). Any instance of desiring, avoiding, choosing, or evaluating is given structure and stability through our habits, our typical and cultivated ways of integrating and interacting with the environment.

Dewey defines character as “the interpenetration of habits” (Dewey 1988, 29). We are what we do, and our doing is a result of previous actions and of the environment in which we act. Yet our ways of acting in, through, and with an environment are always changing. Neither the organism nor the environment is ever the same twice (105). Ideally one's habits enable one to be responsive to new situations and adaptive to varying conditions. A strong character is an

integration of habits, whereas a weak character is composed of contradictory, warring habits pulling one in opposing directions at every turn.³

Impulses are *pivot points* that motivate the reorganizing or redirecting of old habits. Impulses become crucial when impeded, that is, when the organism is inclined to act habitually in a certain way in a certain situation yet does not have the resources to do so. Prior habits cease to be adequate to the current changing situation; thus fluid action is blocked or frustrated. Here both the objective environment and the organism's way of dealing with this environment are subject to revision. In Dewey's paradigm cases of organism-environment transactions, these moments of struggle are like ebbs and flows rather than wars and revolutions. The notion of a "flexible habit" is a refrain in his work and the mark of a moral character. He describes impulse as "a source, an indispensable source, of liberation; but only as it is employed in giving habits pertinence and freshness does it liberate power" (Dewey 1988, 75).

Being flexible in one's habits or open to impulse's freshening power for habits requires a particular mindfulness or intelligence. "Man is a creature of habit, not of reason nor yet of instinct" (Dewey 1988, 88). Habit is a middle-way term for Dewey, a space between organism and environment, freedom and constraint, mind and body, nature and culture. Intelligent and flexible habits are ideal because they are neither radical nor rigidly conservative. When impulses come up, we must not only find the proper outlet for them but also make this process conscious: "the moral correlate of liberated impulse is not immediate activity, but reflection upon the way in which to use impulse to renew disposition and reorganize habit" (117). We ought to be open to instincts and impeded impulses to find new ends and means, to stay fresh and responsive. We need *intelligence* to make this happen, and we require conscious effort, imagination, and planning as part of the reorganization process.

Gathering conduct's constituent phenomena of habit, impulse, and intelligence, Dewey argues that morality has to do with all activities that have alternative possibilities, which can be better (good) or worse (rejected good) (Dewey 1988, 193). Orientation to the present moment highlights the fact that we are always acting, choosing, and favoring some factors and not others. In moral deliberation we find a division of labor between conscious reflection and unconscious habit (193–94). The upshot is not a strict formula but an increase in what requires reflection, with the admittance that habits are always in play. Part of moral activity is judging what to focus on and what to leave up to habit. Conduct, as dynamic being in the world, is experimental, open-ended, and valuing, that is, seeking the better. Conduct is built by habit; cultivating habits is the way to steer conduct.

Lest this scheme start to sound like a closed system operating between an individual organism and environment, or a single character and her world, recall Dewey's claim that when we learn the meaning of our impulses and habits,

we are brought “into the open-air world of objects and social ties” (Dewey 1988, 201). Conduct is irreducibly situated, and the human situation is irreducibly social. We make good sense of our instincts and actions by attending to our habits—their consequences as well as their antecedents—as we interact, contribute, and create. If we so attend, “we shall see that progress proceeds in two ways, and that freedom is found in that kind of interaction which maintains an environment in which human desire and choice count for something” (9). Dewey offers a set of criteria for moral evaluation of political efforts or reform. What is best for others is not “soup-kitchen happiness” but rather deep effects on impulse and habits. When thinking of human flourishing, one must aim at liberation, flexibility, and unification of interest, the quickening of perception, the aptness and extensiveness of memory, the fertility of imagination, and the creativity of thought.

In short, education is the way to “foster conditions that widen the horizons of others and give them command of their own powers, so that they can find happiness in their own fashion” (Dewey 1988, 203). As Sullivan points to in Dewey’s praise of the fluid habits of the young, “Educating . . . means helping the young to form the habit of questioning, rethinking, and rebodging . . .” (Sullivan 2001, 104). The broader and richer the education, the more resources for *imaginative response* one will have. Freedom can be located for Dewey at exactly this always-embodied stage of negotiating and bearing the consequences of dealing with impediments and disharmonies, that is, in the “imaginative transitions” of growth and the dramatic rehearsals through which we generate options. Steven Fesmire writes, “Imagination in Dewey’s central sense is the capacity to concretely perceive what is before us in light of what could be. Its opposite is experience narrowed by acclimation to standardized meanings” (Fesmire 2003, 65). As I argue, Dewey’s preference for possibility, for meanings that proliferate and open rather than stagnate and shrivel, is strongly present in Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics and McWhorter’s genealogical understanding of praxis and transformation. These approaches elaborate the embodied ethical possibilities of flexible habits of transcendence and transformation.

One of Simone de Beauvoir’s ethical keywords is “transcendence,” nicely glossed in Debra Bergoffen’s Introduction to *Pyrrhus and Cineas*:

As human I am perpetually transcending myself toward a yet to be defined future in which I seek to establish myself in my concrete particularity. I am a way of being that makes myself be by reaching beyond myself toward something other than myself. I am a transcending transcendence, a going beyond without end. Today’s tomorrow becomes a yesterday. A new future calls me to new ends. (Bergoffen 2004, 83)

Since at the very same time, “As finite I necessarily fail to bring closure to myself or my projects, this inevitable failure lies at the heart of our condition as finite and existentially free beings” (83).

The other keyword in Beauvoir’s ethics is “ambiguity.” The dance of immanence and transcendence, one’s simultaneous condition of object constrained by necessity and subject condemned to freedom, gets uniquely attuned and insightful treatment throughout Beauvoir’s corpus. Her earlier treatises, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, articulate the fundamental tenet of Beauvoir’s thinking on ethics, namely, the ambiguity of action, given the ambiguity of our condition.

As argued in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, our actions in the world are ambiguous in part because their meanings are not fixed or fixable, either for us as actors or for the others we act toward or upon. Though my action is “free for me,” once accomplished it is “a given for others” (Beauvoir 2004, 125). Once in the world, it forms the facticity of a situation that others can and will transcend. I can neither predict nor control how my act will be taken up by others; being finite and particular, I also cannot maintain its living meaning on my own. This basic indeterminacy of my subjective acting that yet determines objective conditions in the world has a two-fold ethical consequence: I need others to deem my action meaningful, and I need to be aware of how my action creates the situations from which others act. I need others to be free—in a practical, material sense—to walk alongside me and engage my projects in their own unique ways. Moreover, since my projects partially create the other’s situation, I ought to strive individually to ensure these conditions. If I abstain from helping an impoverished man, “I am the very face of that misery . . . I am the facticity of his situation. The other is free based on that, totally free based only on that, but free facing this and not that, facing me. The fate that weighs on the other is always us” (125). The aim of ethical action is keeping the freedom and future possibilities of this transcendence open for ourselves and others.

Beauvoir develops the significance of freedom in social life by further noting that at any moment and in any action “I am not dealing with one freedom but with *several* freedoms. And precisely because they are free, they do not agree among themselves” (Beauvoir 2004, 131). She rejects Kantian hyper-rationality and Hegelian “optimism,” preferring to pay attention to the reality of individuality and failure. I can’t expect every person to follow my specific project. “Some stay put or engage themselves on divergent roads. Some even try their best to stop [my] march and that of [my] followers. Wherever persuasion fails, only violence remains to defend oneself. . . .” (138). Such political problems are “unsolvable. And yet abstention is also impossible; one always acts. We are condemned to failure because we are condemned to violence. We are condemned to violence because man is divided and in conflict with himself, because men are separate and in conflict among themselves” (138). Though

this is a dark and unsettling prospect, Beauvoir closes the essay with what will be the defining pronouncement of her subsequent ethical work, writing, “We must assume our actions in uncertainty and risk, and that is precisely the essence of freedom” (139). Since we are free just in our lack of an exhaustively defined nature, we must take ourselves up and see given facticities as situations to be transcended. In transcending them, we make value; we build the normative compass that guides us onward. For Beauvoir, as for Dewey, ethical action aims to keep freedom and future possibilities open for ourselves and others. For both, though Beauvoir does not articulate this until later writings, habits of openness and dynamic responsiveness assist us in resolving internal and external conflicts. Freedom is concretely practiced when space is cleared for transcendence, that is, when impeded impulses are overcome with good responses rooted in flexible habits. The normative compass we build through our actions is a constellation of habits, and when oriented in certain ways, it ameliorates situations and improves the welfare of others.

For both Dewey and Beauvoir, ethical living is active, experimental, situated, and requires hard and dedicated work. It is socially embedded and affects others. On their shared account of goals as “ends-in-view,” the *telos* of ethical work cannot be absolute or fixed. As Beauvoir reminds us, all projects end; this is in part due to human mortality, but also due to the nature of our life activity itself. “The human being exists in the form of projects that are not projects toward death but projects toward singular ends. He hunts, he fishes, he fashions instruments, he writes books: these are not diversions or flights but a movement toward being” (Beauvoir 2004, 115), and this movement is ongoing. Given ends we may have in view, we can investigate our guiding orientations, and we can move toward enabling others to live lives of freedom and agency. Beauvoir and Dewey think that freedom is found in our responses to conflict and the struggles of present situations, and that practices of freedom require attentive openness to the possibilities of those situations. Given their respective understandings of freedom in terms of transcendence and progress, and attending to the significance the body has in their accounts, putting Beauvoir and Dewey in dialogue with cognitive psychological accounts of habit and experiential accounts of transformative practices can enrich our understanding of freedom’s productive limits.⁴ In the next section I discuss how this ethical orientation may be borne out in the lived tensions and ambiguities of stability and plasticity in the phenomenon of cognitive aging.

II

Understanding freedom as always situated and as active precisely by virtue of contexts and constraints requires letting go of any stiff freedom-determinism dichotomy, and pushes us to pay closer attention to the conditions of our free

and conscious meaning-making. Dewey's notion of habit points to the role of situation in our thinking, acting, and valuing, but also brings us to a point of potential worry, as we'll see in a moment in Beauvoir's discussion of aging. The ambiguity of habit can be fruitfully considered in cognitive-psychological terms as the stability-plasticity paradox. This paradox poses the question: how much room for change exists in human psychological capacities such as memory, personality, language ability, and behavioral and emotional response patterns? These capacities are developed through the sedimentation of experience into knowledge and know-how, and they enable meaningful and intelligible being-in-the-world. In theory, it would seem that at a certain point they become threatened by newness and change, and so defend against such invasion. Yet, as life continues to unfold, cognitive plasticity is required to adapt to broad ongoing environmental changes. As some researchers put it, "... the structure of the brain is constantly changing in response to an unexpectedly wide range of environmental factors" (Kolb, Gibb, and Robinson 2003). Evidence exists that everyday language ability and personality tend to remain relatively consistent as we age, while emotional life increases in stability.⁵ Walking the middle way between sedimentation and spontaneity, the phenomena of embodied habits emerge at the intersection of stability and plasticity, as the enabling know-how we both *get from* and *deploy in* experience.

In *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir notes that habit shows up in physical activity and in thinking; concerned with the rigidity that comes with age, she discusses at length the situations of the elderly scientist, artist, writer, and philosopher. For example: "Above all . . . it is the past that weighs upon the elderly scientist, the past in the form of habits of mind and ideological interests" (Beauvoir 1972, 390). More direly, she suggests that the elderly scientist "... has habits of mind that make him obstinately persist in out-of-date methods" (391) and "... instead of being used for foretelling the future, knowledge can be a hindrance" (393). The reality of such limitations carries ethical consequences: the closing off of possibilities required both for the progress of knowledge and the welfare of the individual working in a research community.

Beauvoir tells that "habit is the past in so far as we do not re-present it but live it in the shape of attitudes and forms of behavior; it is the mass of acquired reactions and automatic reflexes that allow us to walk, speak, write, etc." (Beauvoir 1972, 466). Habits show up both in attitudes and in actions but operate unconsciously. Importantly, she sees them as *increasing* with age:

Routine is present when the action I perform today has as its model that which I performed yesterday, which in its turn reproduced that of the day before, and so on indefinitely. In order to walk I make use of long-established sets of reflexes: but I can invent a new route. Routine is setting out on the same walk

every day. *It is habit in this sense whose role generally increases with the years.* (466, emphasis added)

With this discussion of the sedimentation of behaviors and tendencies over time, Beauvoir hits on both the restrictive and the constructive power of habit. She worries about rigidity that takes the place of active mental life and that causes emotional hardship when the old person “acquires the habit of having habits,” resulting in severe distress when someone else occupies his card-playing table at his daily-visited café, for example (467–68). Habits can drastically limit a person’s adaptivity, her freedom from her own past, her ability to take on a challenging situation and make something new. “On the other hand,” Beauvoir writes, “when a habit is thoroughly integrated into a man’s life, it makes it richer, for habit has a kind of poetry” (468). It brings the past to life again and again by anticipating its repetition in the future. It appears to achieve a synthesis between the in-itself (past) and the for-itself (future). “More than anyone, the old person values the poetry of habit: by merging past, present, and future it removes him from his enemy, time, and it provides him with that eternity which he no longer finds in the present moment” (468). Habit seen in this light “provides the old person with a kind of ontological security,” a strongly developed sense of self and an expert, experienced expectation of what’s going on (469). Yet this potentially causes anxieties whenever it is threatened, and threats to habit are inevitable, since “set reactions and routine can operate only if the outside world is running smoothly and if it presents no problem of any kind” (467). Ideally, one develops on balance more “good” habits that maintain poetic richness in the present.

Work in cognitive psychology supports Beauvoir’s view of habit’s hold increasing with time as well as her portrayal of the ontological risk to self that comes whenever such strong sedimentation is disrupted. Psychologist Don Tucker argues exactly this point, taking up the same example of the elderly professor who resists paradigm shifts and threatens progress that Beauvoir discusses at length in *The Coming of Age* (Tucker and Desmond, 1997). Tucker puts forth a model of cognition based on the vertically integrated anatomy and architecture of the human brain. This paradigm understands brain activity as establishing, maintaining, and taking place through distributed neural patterns. Put crudely, neural networks connect many parts of the brain, particularly the visceral core that houses the limbic system (associated with homeostatic regulation, memory, and emotion) and the cortical shell that handles sensory data. The picture of cognition we get “is therefore organismic, incorporating constraints from the entire brain and body. It is also cumulative, with each new operation of perception and reasoning constrained by that person’s learning history” (Tucker and Desmond 1997, 267). Learning is a matter of weighting neural connections; once strong, a network tends to assimilate incoming infor-

mation to existing patterns rather than refigure its own arrangements. Hence the key dilemma: “Because the same connection weights must be adjusted to accommodate all representational processes, new learning causes a potentially catastrophic loss of prior learning. This is the stability-plasticity dilemma, whether to retain or adapt” (274). Tucker sees this “cumulative representational inertia” (277) as a tradeoff that takes place in every person’s life span: “Children are highly flexible, and they are largely ignorant of the world. Old people tend to become rigid in their thinking, and they bring a wealth of experience to each learning situation” (267–268).

Since on this understanding of the brain, concepts (dynamic neural patterns) span—and so directly involve—various levels of brain architecture, recalibration of some pattern means recalibration of the whole system, even those deepest parts associated with memory, value, and a sense of self. Tucker discusses these implications in terms that clearly show their existential significance, writing:

Because of the stability-plasticity dilemma, a significant insight threatens a loss of the familiar self. For the young person, the trajectory of development courses strongly into the future. The self is a dynamic proposition on this trajectory, and without much history, it is readily given up to be overwhelmed by new experiences. In youth, identity is an emergent thing, and an earlier formulation of the self may be missed only vaguely in the rapid flux of new events. For the old person, on the other hand, the future is no longer an indefinite expanse. A strong life history of experience forms the context for the awareness of present acidities. . . . From this perspective, rigidity may be a necessary neuropsychological strategy of aging. (Tucker and Desmond, unpublished. See also Tucker and Desmond 1997, 279)

This evidence need not be counted as an excuse for the accumulation of Beauvoir’s “bad” habits, however. Humans are unique in their prolonged development and adolescence, which is anatomically marked by extended neural plasticity, especially at the core parts of the brain. The longer adolescence is allowed to be, the longer that one can stay open and flexible. The recommendation is not deliberately protracted immaturity, but enough time and opportunity to develop habits of lifelong learning. The end of high school, college, or initial job training can mean the end of this time of plasticity, for understandable reason: to learn every day, we must be ready to be different every day. We must be capable of perpetual self-transformation, and this is existentially frightening. At the same time, Tucker suggests the possibility of achieving a higher level of stability in the midst of such continual openness, something akin to Dewey’s notion of flexible habit (Tucker 2009). Similarly,

techniques of adaptability, ways to trade social roles and to modify (rather than reduce or lose) attachments to and engagements with the world, are increasingly advocated as strategies of “successful aging” (Baltes and Baltes 1990; Rowe and Kahn 1998; Lupien and Wan 2004).⁶

This pragmatic conclusion converges with how Beauvoir finishes her treatise on aging. While she does not employ the language of habit in her final pronouncements about the oppressed condition of the aged, she can be read as requiring just such practices of self-cultivation or careful and controlled habit-formation. According to Beauvoir,

The greatest good fortune, even greater than health, for the old person is to have his world still inhabited by projects: then, busy and useful, he escapes both from boredom and from decay. The times in which he lives remain his own, and he is not compelled to adopt the defensive or aggressive forms of behavior that are so often characteristic of the final years. His oldness passes, as it were, unnoticed. *For this to be the case he must in his middle age have committed himself to undertakings that set time at defiance:* in our society of exploitation this possibility is refused to the immense majority of human beings. (Beauvoir 1972, 492, emphasis added)

How one sets up one’s life in the transcendent trajectory of youth shapes and informs one’s future situation by cultivating certain projects and characteristics. She states clearly: “Earlier choice and present chance step in to give each old age its particular aspect” (505). Beauvoir does not advocate “preparing” for old age as such: “It is far better not to think about it too much, but to live a fairly committed, fairly justified life so that one may go on in the same path even when all illusions have vanished and one’s zeal for life has died away” (541). This conclusion, on my reading, acknowledges the likelihood of hardened habit and says that we should develop the best habits we can, habits that will get us and keep us on the “right” roads and with enough momentum to keep going for the sake of going, even after other motivations fade away behind us, even when we may have the end of the road in sight.⁷ One should live the sort of life that will drive one to keep living it.

III

While at this moment we don’t know how to pinpoint exactly how our physical practices and neurological processes shape and deploy our habits, we know from Dewey’s account of organism-environment interaction and from much work in cognitive science that habits are not disembodied tools. Our habitual conduct, always ethically weighted in terms of its choosing and its conse-

quences, is not a disembodied affair. Living a good life, one that keeps itself open to itself and to others, is not something we do from armchairs or in grand declarations and gestures: life is a project built and tweaked and borne in every gesticulation, grocery trip, Saturday morning run, and subway conversation. It follows to ask: what might transformative habits look like, and what sorts of practices develop the kind of habits that Dewey and Beauvoir want for us?

Foucault's writings on the daily practices of care and cultivation that constitute embodied ethical subjects are suggestive. Ladelle McWhorter expands on his arguably inconclusive lectures and interviews on ethics in her quasi-autobiographical work *Bodies and Pleasures* (1999), a contemporary offering in the spirit of the kind of feminist embodied ethic I'm tracking.⁸ McWhorter demonstrates that proliferation of self-possibilities is a bodily task, a challenge specifically for our normalized developmental bodies that are living organisms existing in networks of power-knowledge. How can one *live* this body in and through the ever-evolving social and physical spaces, pressures, and opportunities that render it always object and subject?

McWhorter's Foucaultian sketches combine the best of Beauvoir and Dewey: growth without end. The kinds of practices she recommends we undertake involve discipline (and the freedom it brings in the form of *capacity*) *without* docility (which inhibits choosing and changing), and thus build up a sort of plastic stability (flexible habit, constrained freedom). Furthermore, we can move beyond a mind/body dualistic understanding of self-cultivation by undertaking activities and projects that bring accumulation of implicit knowledge in the sense of *knowing-how* without giving up the intelligence and reflection available to us as conscious and languaged creatures. Foucault and McWhorter emphasize that reflection and reflexivity play a necessary part in ethical habit-formation.⁹ While we employ techniques and make conscious choices of taking on certain habits at various points along the road, we don't and can't know where we're going, what skills and joys we'll pick up, or how these will point us onward. We have to keep monitoring this progress while staying open to shifting horizons.

Relevant to these purposes, McWhorter offers the use of *pleasure* as a tool of cultivation and habit forming, a way to carefully, consciously and non-consciously, extend beyond the selves that we currently are. McWhorter relates two of her own practices of pleasure that each develop habits of getting-beyond-one's-self: line dancing and gardening. The unforeseen upshots of McWhorter's experiments with dirt include meditations on the one and the many—"the dirt's activity gives occasion for the play of beautiful things . . . There wouldn't be individually integrated, identifiable things were it not for that unindividuated volume in perpetual disintegration"—and a realization that if Doritos have too many chemicals for her dirt, then they may not be good for her body (McWhorter 1999, 167). Deciding to learn line dancing to facil-

itate dating in a new city, McWhorter discovers a nearly ineffable degree of skill and enjoyment in bodily movement (“The dance just flowed through me. I had it. I knew it. And it wasn’t a matter of knowing how the dance was supposed to look. I could feel the dance from the inside” [171]) as well as a newly intimate (so freshly problematizing) awareness of the *whiteness* of her cowboy-booted and dancing bodily self (172–75).

McWhorter’s carrying forward of Foucault’s call to self-care into an understanding of the self as a constrained and so *capable*, developmental and thus *changing*, situated and thereby *local and personal* place of opening and opening, gets at the heart of the habits-of-transcendence ethic I find in reading Dewey and Beauvoir together. She blends pragmatism and existentialism when she quotes Foucault: “We must make the intelligible appear against a background of emptiness and deny its necessity. We must think what exists is far from filling all possible spaces” and herself points out “These choices cannot be universalized. All answers are situational and subject to change; they function more like hypotheses for experimentation than like solutions rooted in established truth” (McWhorter 1999, 192). The contingency of our human condition means that we are called to carve out alternatives against the grain of preset paths, to make the *more* of life visible. If we take this challenge to heart, it makes little sense to argue that there is only one way to see and live differently.

This last point is particularly useful to keep in mind when considering the always potentially toxic “cult of the body” that haunts any prescriptive program of embodiment. This domain is one site that demonstrates the broad social-political feminist implications of the foregoing discussions. When articulating an embodied ethics, advocating bodywork or somaesthetic practice might be expected. Bodywork like yoga, Feldenkrais, or the Alexander method, insofar as these involve attention to and mindful practice of habit formation and transformation, is obviously of a piece with the ethic that I have been describing. However, in addition to many risks inherent to these practices, particularly where women are concerned,¹⁰ somaesthetic practice is misleading when thought of as an end unto itself. The guiding ethical ideal I am developing is one of living in the present, richly, happily and with an open heart; habits that resist sedimentation in the soul as much as in the spine are at issue.¹¹

In *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir suggests that personal habits may keep possibilities open longer by keeping one in the regular practice of active, responsive engagement with the world. However, her most concrete prescriptions are on a broad social scale, since one’s habits and one’s individual efforts at self-care or self-creation are always and irreducibly contingent upon one’s wider environment and situation.¹² Beauvoir shares her social and historical perspective with Dewey and Sullivan.¹³ As Beauvoir says, “Once we have understood what the state of the aged really is, we cannot satisfy ourselves with calling for a more generous “old-age policy,” higher pensions, decent housing,

and *organized leisure*. It is the whole system that is at issue and our claim cannot be otherwise than radical—change life itself” (Beauvoir 1972, 543). Beauvoir’s discussions of habit show her appreciation of delicate and difficult negotiations between the determining forces of sedimentation and situation, as well as the need for plasticity and possibility, which are valuable precisely *because* of the risk they pose to the self. Life consists of conflict, muddled indeterminacy, and vast environmental contingency. Indeed, living in complex environments and learning to cope with them provides opportunities for flexible habit formation and thus successful aging.¹⁴ Education and training in practices of growth and transformation are required to live consciously and gracefully, and we need to be *supported* when we undertake practices whose self-transformative ends are unforeseen. *We cannot control flexible habit formation on our own.*¹⁵

It is wrong to read Beauvoir as rejecting bodily-oriented projects outright; she rejects a too-neat or too-decided solution to the complex and always contextually shaped phenomena that constitute aging (or gendered embodiment).¹⁶ In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir puts qualifications on potentially liberating practices of exercise for women (Beauvoir 1989, 535). There is nothing wrong with developing one’s body in various ways; nonetheless, certain kinds of attention to the body, undertaken in certain socio-cultural and historical settings, are objectifying, “distracting”, or otherwise damaging. One need only flip through a current issue of *Self* or *Women’s Health Magazine* to note the complicated and contradictory messages that conflate health with beauty with weight loss with femininity and so on.¹⁷ In undertaking these various routines and activities, women are free agents who live their bodies actively; yet their embodied subjectivity is also always for the other a body-as-object to be looked at, directed, admired, and so on. The meanings of a person’s acts of exercise or somatic care, just like any other action, are never wholly exhausted by her intention or fully under her control. In the Foucault-McWhorter idiom, we might say that magazines like *Self* are examples of our historical bodily practices of self-overcoming being too constrained by normalization and docility; these projects turn back on themselves by undermining any novelty or unexpected outcome. In this literature, female selves are built to be “best” by terms that women don’t set. McWhorter comments:

Some ways of engaging in self-styling practices don’t counter normalizing regimes. Stylizing practices that pursue goals beyond stylization itself, goals beyond the practice of becoming other, while implicitly affirming freedom, don’t seek to affirm freedom in the end; they seek simply to achieve a static point of pure self-presence that would no longer change. . . . If I seek to become a being who is incapable of becoming anything new, I seek to become something other than my capacity to become. If

we want to oppose normalization, we should develop disciplinary practices that don't aim at stasis. Our style of existence should be an openness to becoming—which is to say, an affirmation of freedom. (McWhorter 1999, 193)

Such dynamic freedom is surely the intended benefit of bodywork—or gardening, line dancing, or any other deliberate yet underdetermined project of transformation. The idea is to avoid getting stuck: by being careful and mindful of our selves and situations, both when we undertake a given project and as we change ourselves by it, we can track where we're going. We can compare, for example, the habits of self-formation that are likely to develop through following the diet and exercise advice on offer in mass-distributed women's lifestyle magazines, downloading their calorie calculators and quick-fix tips and so on, with habits potentially acquired by reading explicitly feminist sources outside of the fashion-beauty complex, such as Stumptuous.com's strength-training articles or explanations of body fat composition and accompanying food choice recommendations.¹⁸ Which practices feel better? Which ones teach skills that enable future decision-making? Which promote flexibility, not only in the process but also in the desired outcome? Similarly, we should be healthily wary of scientific standardizations when it comes to goals of “successful aging.”¹⁹ Clearly there is existential and ethical import to living well and aging well, but only when there is room to do this on our own terms. The insight that Beauvoir finds in *The Coming of Age* is that we are limited by our own past actions, not only in generic existential terms of what “projects” we might take on, but concretely, in what thoughts we can entertain, what physical activities our bodies afford and how we move when we pursue them. Still, as she insists in her earlier work, we should strive to live our lives as freely and authentically as we can. Cultivating habits of flexibility aids such goals.

I am not advocating that we dispense with practices that target the bodily form as part of good habit formation and living a good life. Rather, my argument is that they are not the only practices that would make up a program of embodied ethics. Treating them as such is dangerous in two ways: we may fail to overcome problematic norms that limit freedom and possibility, since body-targeting practices tend to be co-opted by health-and-beauty biases; and we may obscure the role of other habits of meaning-and-value-making, cognitive and linguistic habits of reflection and deliberation, which are no less embodied and no less integral to cultivating the virtue of self-transformation.

NOTES

1. For one overview in applied virtue ethics including Asian philosophies of self-cultivation, see Walker and Ivanhoe 2007. Applied virtue ethics finds recent uptake in naturalized ethics as well: see Hinde 2002; and Haidt 2001.

2. In much scholarship, Simone de Beauvoir is criticized for rejecting the body as mired in immanence as well as praised for paying attention to women's lived experience. For reconciliations of this tension, see Butler 1986 and Stavro 1999 for careful work reading Beauvoir beyond "Sartrean bodies and Cartesian ghosts." I contend that her careful attunement to *ambiguity* rescues talk of embodiment from metaphysical obscurity. Reading Beauvoir by pragmatist and genealogist lights helps reveal a trend toward ever more situated, conditioned, and determined understandings of the human condition.

3. This overlap of rigid habits that come into friction with each other is a condition for the possibility of transformation and resistance on Sullivan's reading of Butler's notion of performativity via Dewey (for example, see Sullivan 2001, 96–97, 104–106).

4. Historically, scholars have posited a real tension between a naturally conditioned organism responding to its environment (the pragmatist picture) and a transcendent, conscious subject in danger of bad faith (the existential-phenomenological view). This is a false dilemma. Beauvoir holds that *the assumption of the ambiguity between immanence and transcendence* constitutes real authenticity and freedom, the only kind possible for humans. Thus the aspects of human life that are conditioned, situated, concretely contextualized, and limited are obligatory variables in every action. Furthermore, as Rosenthal and Bourgeois clarify in *Pragmatism and Phenomenology: A Philosophic Encounter*, pragmatists like Dewey and James share phenomenologists' simultaneous rejection of reductive naturalism and careful preservation of levels of lived experience as significant (Rosenthal and Bourgeois 1980, 98). There is no fundamental impasse between an existential-phenomenological account of a situated subject and a pragmatic story of a human organism interacting in and with an environment. Meanings involve yet exceed physical causality, and freedom isn't fully free.

5. For example, see Lupien and Wan 2004; Williams et al. 2006; and Wingfield and Grossman 2006.

6. "Successful aging," a 1980s and 1990s paradigm shift from a standard medical perspective viewing old age as a disease, includes different approaches. Lupien and Wan discuss favorably two multi-pronged approaches to successful aging. One model "views successful aging as a process of continuous adaptation"; it involves "selective optimization with compensation" and "describes a general process of adaptation" that "attempts to explain the dynamic interchange of gains and losses throughout life, and how age-related and self-produced changes in oneself can be seen as an example of the plasticity of the aging mind" (Lupien and Wan 2004, 1421).

7. "We must explore how we might loosen the sedimentation of our habits and performances and combat what Dewey has called the 'social arterial sclerosis' that endangers both societal and individual 'health'" (Sullivan 2001, 98).

8. Colin Koopman hails Foucault for developing in his later work an ethical *orientation* toward self-transformation, but puts pressure on the content of his *commitments* that might make up a prescriptive program (Koopman forthcoming).

9. For example, in Foucault's idea of self-writing.

10. See Bartky 1994; Sullivan 2001; Zack 2005; and Heyes 2007 for discussions on this point.

11. This is not to suggest a mind-body duality (since habits are thoroughly embodied) but to caution against the limited ends of some of these projects.

12. In *The Second Sex*, when discussing the potential yet always socially arbitrated burdens of maternity, she writes, “. . . in the human species individual ‘possibilities’ depend upon the economic and social situation” (Beauvoir 1989, 35). As Lupien and Wan write in their article on successful aging: “. . . it is well known that education level and socioeconomic income are both positively related to cognitive function” (Lupien and Wan 2004, 1420).

13. For example, see Sullivan 2001, 129.

14. In discussing the phenomenon of environmental enrichment (EE), Baroncelli et al. write, “Strong correlative and epidemiological evidence shows that lifestyle, including occupation, leisure activities, and physical exercise, has a direct effect on the risk of cognitive decline. Results indicate that a higher level and variety of mental and physical activity is associated with a lower cognitive decline and reduced risk for dementia” (Baroncelli et al. 2010, 1099). See also Lupien and Wan 2004, 1419.

15. Note that Sullivan makes a very similar point in her guidelines for somaesthetics (Sullivan 2001, 121,129).

16. Beauvoir’s caution toward projects of bodily cultivation is not necessarily as metaphysically rooted nor as absolute as critics sometimes insist, for instance when Shusterman surmises: “In any case, the argument that scrutiny of one’s somatic experience necessarily turns one into a mere immanent and passive object is grounded in false dichotomies of mind/body, subject/object, self/world, activity/passivity” (Shusterman 2008, 98). Beauvoir *doesn’t* think that such scrutiny turns one into a mere object, since she holds that humans are *always* ambiguous. It would be both impossible and in bad faith to think that we *could* reduce our bodies to objects. We should take care of our bodies but we also must realize that we do this at certain times and places, under the auspices of certain technologies and economic conditions, and for certain audiences.

17. Positive resources for feminine physical self-cultivation exist; one notable example is the weight-training website Stumptuous.com.

18. The term *fashion-beauty complex* is Bartky’s (1994).

19. Lupien and Wan conclude that in research and in daily living, “the views that one holds about the process of ageing can have an important impact on physical health and cognitive performance in old age. It is, therefore, possible to propose that the determinants of successful ageing stem in part from the societal influences of age stereotypes and older individual’s self-perception of ageing” (Lupien and Wan 2004,1423).

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