Mindlessness

Thinking is overrated: golfers perform best when distracted and under pressure; firefighters make the right calls without a clue as to why; and you are yourself ill advised to look at your steps as you go down the stairs, or to try and remember your pin number before typing it in. Just do it, mindlessly. Both empirical psychologists and the common man have long worked out that thinking is often a bad idea, but philosophers still hang on to an intellectualist picture of human action. This book challenges that picture and calls on philosophers to wake up to the power of mindlessness: it is our habits, skills and conventions that help us cope with a world way too diverse for us to hope to always reinterpret it. The book presents the empirical evidence that has been accumulating over the last few decades and offers a philosophical analysis of mindless phenomena such as habits, skilled activity, automatic actions, emotional and spontaneous reactions and social conventions, arguing that traditional philosophical theories of action should be revised to do justice to this forgotten but important part of our lives: when we act mindlessly, we are free and fully rational even though we neither deliberate nor are aware of what we are doing.

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a Usa,
che questo libro l'ha già fatta ridere

… und schreib getrost
“Im Anfang war die Tat”

(Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §402,
originally in Goethe’s *Faust*)

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PREFACE

The ability for thought is one of the most successful anthropological differences that we humans have managed to come up with, up there with language, probably. In this respect it is only natural, if a bit self-referential, for a philosophy book to be about thought and thinking. More surprising, if anything, is that this book should look at the dark side of thinking: namely that large forgotten part of our lives in which we do not think and are better off not thinking. Sometimes – actually, as this book shows, pretty often - thinking gets in the way of successfully getting things done; sometimes thinking impairs our performance, be that an action or a judgement: we often act *mindlessly* and that is also, in many cases, evolutionary advantageous for us. This phenomenon of mindlessness, I argue in this book, has long gone underestimated and while empirical psychologists have woken up to it in the last few decades, philosophers still show very little interest. Here I am not interested in a diagnosis of this bit of philosophical anthropocentrism – and indeed you won't find one in this book; more modestly, I offer a philosophical analysis of mindless behaviour which is meant to do justice to a wrongly ignored phenomenon. I present the empirical evidence for mindlessness from the last few decades of psychological experiments and argue that mindless behaviour (automatic and habitual actions, skilled activities, conventional behaviour, emotional and spontaneous reactions) is a philosophically interesting topic because it challenges some established accounts of agency, such as those based on a combination of *internalism* and *causalism* which explain human actions in terms of the rationalising psychological states that are supposed to be the causes of our actions. The positive contribution of this book is not meant to be offering a new theory of action that does justice to mindless behaviour – even though you will find, here and there, suggestions as to which direction I consider more promising; the positive contribution of this book is only meant to be to acknowledge an important part of our lives that we are all too familiar with but hardly talk about – at least in books, anyway. But acknowledging our mindlessness should not be understood to mean acknowledging our shortcomings or a less than rational aspect of our agency: this book normalises mindless behaviour in showing that it is, mostly, fully intentional and fully rational. It is not an embarrassing exception: it is the proud rule of how we cope with a

challenging world. Being mindless is just as good and central a part of ourselves as being mindful: when we do something mindlessly we are acting in just the same sense in which we are acting the rest of the time; and if the rest of the time we are acting rationally and intentionally, then we are also acting rationally and intentionally when we are acting mindlessly; if the rest of the time we are acting freely, then we are also acting freely when we are acting mindlessly. We are being ourselves and those mindless actions are also our own. Indeed, in the spirit of Aristotle, I am tempted to say – even though I shall not pursue this claim in the book – that our mindless self is our true self because it is not mediated by thought. Being mindless is, in short, a good thing. Let us not be ashamed of it; let us cultivate it.

Ulm, 13.2.2013

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book continues the work I had started while doing my PhD at the University of Edinburgh and that I published as a monograph in 2008 under the title *Mind Out of Action*. In this respect many colleagues, friends and students who contributed to that work have also been influential, more or less explicitly, for this prosecution. For that I thank them. Also, in the last year I was lucky enough to organise (together with Neil Roughley) two conferences on issues that are central to this volume: *Control and the Absent Mind* in the summer of 2012 and the *Automatic Actions* workshop in January 2013. I thank those that have made those events possible and in particular speakers and other participants at the two meetings. I was pleasantly surprised to see how many people even within philosophy are actually interested in this topic. Also, in the summer semester of 2012 I taught a course at Universität Duisburg-Essen on the philosophy and psychology of habit and automaticity which has helped me greatly in finishing this book: it was a lively and successful class and I learned a lot from my students; it was too large a class to mention all the students there by name, but at least in one case in this book I explicitly use an example that I owe to a student from that class, Gerd Szafran. I thank them all: writing books is fun but teaching is way better! I am also grateful to my university for being able to teach on topics that I am writing on: that is not a given. Finally, I must thank those who were more directly influential in producing this book: Josef Clinch for a brilliant cover; Enza Trotta for helping with the bibliography; Günter and Katharina Gerstberger for flying all the way to Mexico so that I could have the necessary quiet in their empty house to finish this book; and all those at CSP who have been very supportive: thanks go at least to Carol Koulikourdi, Andy Nercessian, Amanda Millar and Emily Surrey.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Thinking is overrated. No wonder that philosophers in particular and intellectuals more in general would talk thinking up: it is both their only tool and their best product. More surprising is, if anything, that common sense should also hold thinking in such high regard: THE people should know better – experience should have taught them. *Think twice*; *think again*; *come to think of it*; *think before you speak*; *think it over*; *well thought-out*; these are only a few examples of how entrenched is thinking's reputation. And, to be sure, it would be silly to pretend that thinking is always a bad idea: sometimes you should think twice; sometimes thinking again is the better option; sometimes thinking before speaking is wise; some options should indeed be thought over and likewise some courses of actions must be thought-out. Sometimes, but not very often. Very often, in life, you know what to do already, you do not need to think: because you have done it thousand times before; because you have trained hard; because it is the right thing to do; because you have learned it through years of practice; because you are an expert, or anyway your body definitely is.

This book is about all those other times, when thinking would just be a waste of precious cognitive resources; all those other times when it's not just that you don't need to think; rather, thinking would interfere and compromise a performance which has otherwise been refined to perfection. You have probably had the experience of accidentally looking at the steps while walking down a flight of stairs: that doesn't make walking down easier; it makes it harder. The modern version of this phenomenon has to be thinking about your pin number before typing it in: that's just about the best way to get it wrong. Sometimes, as I wait at the back of the queue, I need to remind myself *not* to think about my pin number when my turn comes. The curious destiny of man: billions of years of evolution only to end up being afraid of thinking.

This book is about the philosophy and psychology of acting without thinking: the latter shows a growing body of studies on automaticity, habit, and other *mindless* phenomena; the former struggles to catch up, hanging

on to an intellectualist picture of human action. This intellectualist bias, widespread across philosophy, needs readdressing: there are growing empirical reasons to suspect that explaining action in terms of conscious (or even less than conscious) thought ends up leaving out the majority of human activity; the book presents this empirical evidence and also puts forward a series of theoretical arguments which point in the same direction. So this is, in short, a philosophy book which argues for less thinking: a bit like a tobacco corporation lobbying for fewer cigarettes.

There is also another important sense in which philosophy overestimates thinking: normatively. There is a long tradition in philosophy, often referred to as Kantian, which takes moral agency to require rational deliberation; or, to formulate the same kind of view more carefully, which at least prioritises, morally speaking, actions which are the result of rational deliberation over those which are not. This diverse tradition has possibly its most explicit manifestation in the so-called *Doctrine of Double Effect*, according to which whether or not an action is intended makes a difference to its moral permissibility.[1]

In fairness, at the normative level we do not find the kind of intellectualist monopoly that we just described for the theoretical level of action explanation. First of all, this is because of the wide-spread influence of consequentialism. But also, and this is more to the point here, because often the intellectualist Kantian approach is contrasted with an Aristotelian approach founded around character, virtue, and habit. According to a particular interpretation of Aristotle that I am very fond of, a certain degree of habit, automaticity, or *mindlessness* is even necessary for an action to count as virtuous: quickly said, the idea would be that for an action to count as virtuous it is not enough that the action be in accordance with the virtues or what the virtuous agent would have done in that same situation; rather, the action is only virtuous if it is a spontaneous expression of the agent's character; if the agent did not need to think about whether to act that way because the virtuous action came naturally (automatically, habitually, or mindlessly) to her. So at least at the normative level, and if one follows a particular streak in the Aristotelian tradition, thinking has not always been overrated in the history of philosophy.

It is important to emphasize from the start the clear parallel between the theoretical overestimation of thinking and its normative overestimation: on the one hand, an appeal to conscious (or less than conscious) thought is

[1] More on double effect in Chapter 7: also, I am writing a book on double effect which I hope to bring out next year and which is provisionally titled *Ethics without Intention*.

taken to be necessary for the *explanation* of human action; symmetrically, an appeal to thought is taken to be necessary for the *justification* of human action. That this issue transcends the traditional divide between theoretical and practical philosophy could well be an indication of its centrality. But in this book I will, with the only exception of Chapter 7, merely deal with the theoretical role of thinking, across philosophy and psychology, in the explanation of action.

Here a first distinction is in order, which also reflects the structure of this volume: I would argue that philosophers overestimate thinking and that they therefore underestimate the diverse phenomenon that gives this book its title, mindlessness; the same cannot be said of psychologists, some of which at least in one important respect actually overestimate mindlessness and automaticity: that is because they take these phenomena to be challenges to free will. So in Part I and Part II of this book I discuss mindlessness and automaticity from within a philosophical framework, arguing that standard philosophical theories for the explanation of human action have a problem in dealing with mindlessness and automaticity; while Part III of the book is dedicated to the psychologists' overestimation of mindlessness and automaticity, where I argue that these phenomena pose no interesting challenge to free will. The continuity between Part I & II and Part III of this book should be understood as a general attempt at normalizing mindlessness: on the one hand, mindlessness needs to be philosophically normalized to show that it is a common phenomenon which cannot be banned as anything less than fully intentional and fully rational; so we need philosophical theories of action that can account for mindless behaviour as fully intentional and fully rational behaviour. On the other hand, mindlessness needs to be normalized also within empirical psychology in that it is, again, a common phenomenon which has nothing to do with classic challenges to our free will: briefly, the claim is that when we act or judge mindlessly, we are no less free than when we act or judge mindfully.

In the rest of this introductory chapter I present the topic of this book, mindlessness, in its three crucial elements: its functional aspect (Section 1); its explanatory aspect (Section 2); and its normative aspect (Section 3). I then conclude this introduction by briefly summarizing the content of each chapter (Section 4).

1. Mindlessness: functional

Following up on the framework of the philosophical underestimation of mindlessness with which we have started this introduction, we could

very roughly say that while the normative aspect of mindlessness has a solid old Aristotelian tradition and has also experienced a recent revival in virtue ethics, the explanatory and functional aspects of mindlessness remain under-discussed in philosophical circles. That is all the more surprising when one considers the amount of empirical work that has gone in the psychology of mindlessness in the last decades, including some recent successful popularizations of this work. Starting from Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* through Gigerenzer's *Gut Feelings* to Duhigg's *The Power of Habit*, the general public shows more interest for this topic than philosophers. Those books are only meant to offer a feel for recent interest in the topic and should not be considered a coherent group (as for example one could easily add to the list at least Gladwell's *Blink* and also *Nudge* by Thaler and Sunstein), neither in terms of content nor in terms of target: while the first two of them – along with *Nudge* - have been written by established psychologists, *The Power of Habit* – just like *Blink* - is just a journalist's journey in both empirical research and common sense on the role of habits and habitual behaviour in our life.

Let us start with the functional aspect of mindlessness. Here is an astonishing example of the kind of research that has lead to this small storm of popular interest: Sian Beilock and colleagues compared the performances of expert golfers with those of novices and found that, under time pressure, expert golfers perform better than when they are not under time pressure! Novices, unsurprisingly, perform better when they are not under pressure. In a related study, expert golfers and novices were either told to concentrate on their swing or they were given an extra task to concentrate on (counting the number of tones coming out of a recorder). Expert golfers did worse when they were able to concentrate! Unsurprisingly, novices did better when they could focus solely on their swing.[2]

This study is important for two related reasons. First of all, this study poses a challenge to common sense: thinking before doing is not always the best strategy. It's not just that thinking before doing isn't always necessary and therefore we should sometimes abstain for reasons of economy: rather, sometimes thinking before doing makes our performance worse. Thinking, then, is not always functional to doing; rather, as Beilock shows, thinking is sometimes dysfunctional to doing. But for the purposes of this book the criteria for the functionality and dysfunctionality of thinking before doing are even more interesting – and that's the second reason why this study is important: whether or not thinking is functional or

[2] For more details on this study see the next chapter.

dysfunctional depends, namely, on who you are; what you have learned; what you are good at; what your habits are like. Importantly, then, whether or not thinking is a good idea does not depend on what you want or on your psychological and conscious states at the time of the performance: it rather depends on your history. If you have been educated in a certain way, for example, thinking will not be a good idea – it will be a bad idea (in this case, if you have been educated to the game of golf). Notice, also, that Beilock's study confirms the experiences I mentioned at the very beginning: don't think nor look at your steps while walking on a familiar path or flight of stairs, otherwise you will increase the chances of tripping over. It's not just that it is a waste of time and cognitive resources; it is positively dangerous, as Beilock and colleagues showed with the example of expert golfers. That's because most of us, most of the time, in most places, are expert walkers.

We have thereby identified two important elements of mindless performances: mindless performances are often either skilled activities or habitual activities – both of which have to do with expertise. Here I do not want to attempt a definition of mindless action, and certainly I do not think that mindless action must necessarily be either skilled or habitual; but it does seem to me that most of its more interesting manifestations have to do with expertise, without ruling out other forms of unconscious or automatic behaviour, such as spontaneous reactions or emotional behaviour. A further interesting related kind of activity are actions that follow social conventions – think of Hart's famous example (in philosophy anyway) of taking the hat off when entering church; while those behaviours need not be unaware, it seems that they are often mindless in that what explains these behaviours is the social convention itself and not the psychological states of individual agents. I do not want to mention too many examples in this introductory chapter because this book is full of either real or imaginary examples of mindless behaviour, automatic actions, habits, and related phenomena. But in thinking about skilled activity and habitual action, one could think on the one hand about the movements and strokes of a tennis player and, on the other hand, about one's morning routines. It is quickly clear that skills and habits are related phenomena: both are the result of endless repetition, refinement, improvement.

A similar point about expert intuition in everyday life can be found in Kahneman:

> Expert intuition strikes us as magical, but it is not. Indeed, each of us performs feats of intuitive expertise many times each day. Most of us are pitch-perfect in detecting anger in the first word of a telephone call,

> recognize as we enter a room that we were the subject of the conversation, and quickly react to subtle signs that the driver of the car in the next lane is dangerous. Our everyday intuitive abilities are no less marvellous than the striking insights of an experienced firefighter or physician – only more common (Kahneman 2011:11).

Interestingly, Kahneman's examples are not only cases of physical action such as in Beilock's golfers; there are also, importantly, cases of expert judgement. One famous case in point, here, also mentioned by Kahneman, is Klein's (1999) fire-fighter who, without knowing why, gets all his men out of a burning building the moment before the floor collapses. The fire-fighter chief realised only after the event that the fire had been particularly quiet and that his ears had been particularly hot. The chief had picked up those features of the situation without realising it. That's the expert feat of someone who has been in thousand of burning buildings before; someone who has heard and smelled thousands of different fires before. The case is very similar to Beilock's golfers once you think of it: had the chief stopped to reflect on exactly what was different, he might have delayed his decision for those very few seconds that saved his life and the lives of his men. Again, for the fire-fighter chief as for the expert golfers the same is true: thinking would not have just been a waste of cognitive resources that one could have better invested somewhere else; thinking would have been fatal to the successful completion of the task.

Sometimes this fire-fighter story gets told somewhat differently. In this variant, one could imagine that the same fire-fighter makes the same correct call, rescuing his crew. But afterwards, the fire-fighter is still at a loss as to what made him get his crew out of the building. That is, the fire-fighter himself cannot tell, but someone else – maybe a fire-fighters' trainer or some other sort of meta-expert, maybe some cool CSI-type from the telly – is able to explain to the chief that he must have noticed – at some level – that the fire was particularly quiet and that his ears were particularly hot. And here one could introduce a further variant: where in one version of the story the chief is able to confirm the meta-expert's hypothesis while in the other version of the story the chief cannot tell either way whether the meta-expert has correctly identified the actual features of the situation that made his call the right call.

Why am I telling all these different hypothetical stories about the fire-fighter chief? While which one of these different stories one takes does not make a difference to the functional aspect of the chief's correct mindless call, those different stories can be distinguished philosophically. In the last one, for example, one would have to at least challenge the idea that the

chief deserves praise: he has no idea why he made the call and has no privileged access to his reasons. Why should he then be responsible for the call? Furthermore, one could imagine that in the last version of the story it is whoever trained the chief that deserves the credit and not the chief himself, who blindly trusted his training. On the other hand, though, if we think of a reversed case where the chief acts similarly mindlessly but makes the wrong call, would the mindlessness of his action excuse him? Probably not; but, apart from notorious asymmetries between positively and negatively evaluable behaviours (the so-called Knobe Effect), the question would remain of whether one could truly claim that the chief intentionally and rationally made the call (right or wrong) when he had no access to his reasons for making that call. This introductory chapter is not the place to get into the argumentative details of these issues; here I just wanted to illustrate the point that right behind a quite obvious functional role of expertise there are difficult philosophical issues to settle (more on this also in the next section) – and that's what this book attempts to do.

There is another important element to the functionality of mindless actions and mindless judgment – which I think can also be nicely illustrated by the fire-fighter's example. One crucial issue is whether deliberation is necessary for rationality and, therefore, whether mindless actions and mindless decisions can be rational ones. And in one sense I have already answered this question by illustrating the functionality of mindlessness. Did the fire-fighter chief act rationally? He certainly did, one could answer, in that he did the right thing and saved his crew. But what if things had turned out differently? It can't be that the rationality of his behaviour depends entirely on how things turned out, it will be quite fairly pointed out. And then one would have to start assessing things such as the reliability of the fire-fighter's expertise in order to establish whether the fire-fighter acted rationally. But in one important sense this is beside the point: as the fire-fighter acted without knowing what his reasons for acting were, one may think that that's enough to preclude this action from being rational. Mindless action, then, also throws up important questions about the nature of rational agency and rational decision. And it looks like one will need a conception of rationality that allows for at least some cases of mindless action and mindless decision to be included. Here, again, an intellectualistic conception of rationality risks leaving out a lot of successful human activity. And, I'd like to point out to conclude this section, an intellectualistic conception could also leave out some unsuccessful human activity.

Here is a scenario which I think illustrates this point quite nicely and that I owe to a student of mine: some people – especially older people –

tend to take their umbrella even if it's not raining. That, you could say, is a good example of a habit: as you walk out of the door, you mindlessly grab the umbrella. Now, you may also think that this scenario illustrates how habits can lead us to make mistakes and how sometimes we consciously need to intervene to prevent our habits from leading us astray. This is, indeed, what Kahneman suggests with his talk of System 1 (the automatic level) and System 2 (the conscious level): the conscious level has a monitoring role over the automatic level and sometimes needs to intervene when the automatic level cannot cope alone. Now, if you saw an older gentleman carrying an umbrella on a mild day, you may find yourself wondering whether his conscious System 2 should not have known better. What a waste of time and energy, taking your umbrella on a mild day. But the point of this example is to show that this way of thinking is short-sighted: one should not think about the negligible amount of energy being wasted on this one day; one should think long term about the substantial amount of energy saved by the establishment of the habit: instead of checking, everyday, what the weather's like; instead of watching, everyday, the weather report; and instead of all the risks connected with these activities (the report might be inaccurate, say; the weather may unexpectedly take a bad turn); instead of all of this, there is the more economical and safer option of establishing a practice. This is only a tiny example of what I take to be the fundamental role of habits, practices, and automaticity (in one word, mindlessness) in successful economical behaviour and life in general: that's why just deeming this behaviour as something less than rational won't do.[3]

Summing up, the point about the functional aspect of mindlessness is that, whatever your teacher used to tell you at school, thinking before doing, thinking before deciding and thinking before speaking are not always your best bet.

2. Mindlessness: explanatory

In talking about mindless phenomena in terms of their functional, explanatory, and normative roles, one could be easily tempted to group the explanatory and functional roles together as opposed to the normative role. But that would be a bit quick; and indeed a different grouping is, in one important respect, more accurate: namely explanatory on the one side and

[3] Just to be absolutely clear: this is clearly not to say that there are no bad habits and neither is to say that we should never consciously intervene to stop or correct a mindless activity of ours.

normative and functional on the other side. Because, quite obviously, what I said in the previous section about the functionality and dysfunctionality of thinking was normatively loaded. To say that an agent is better off not thinking is a normative statement; on the other hand, though, to say that a performance is more or less successful as a result of deliberation or lack thereof doesn't need to get one entangled in complicated normative issues: the success of a performance can just be measured in terms of what the agent was trying to do, so that both expert golfers and novices were trying to get a good hit, and in these terms we can say that while novices are better off concentrating and thinking about the performance and taking their time, expert golfers are better off not concentrating about what they are trying to do.

The explanatory aspect of mindlessness and automaticity, on the other hand, does not involve any of these evaluative considerations. Here the point is, quite simply, how one is to explain these agential phenomena. And, philosophically, the first issue is exactly whether those phenomena should count as actions or not. Briefly stating a possible objection, if action necessarily requires awareness and we define mindless behaviours in terms of lack of awareness, then mindless behaviours cannot be actions. This conceptual point, though, appears to fly in the face of the kind of cases that we have been introducing. Quite obviously, as we go through our morning routine of turning the alarm off, brushing teeth, putting the kettle on, turning on the radio, and so on, we are acting. And we are acting in just the same sense in which we are acting the rest of the time. The same goes for the expert golfers, the tennis players, the fire-fighters, etc. Intuitively, those are actions. But then we need an account of human action that can include all these mindless activities.

Most cases of mindless behaviour are very obviously cases of action, as we just saw. But it's not always that easy. Think of Damasio's Iowa Gambling Task, for example. Participants were confronted with four different decks of cards to which positive and negative rewards were attached. By playing the game and turning enough cards over, healthy participants realized pretty quickly which decks were advantageous and which less so. The amazing thing with this study, though, is that participants had already altered their behaviour to their own advantage before being able to say which the better decks were. And, even more astonishingly, participants' hands seem to have noticed the difference between the decks even before that. Damasio and colleagues therefore identified three different phases: a first phase - "pre-hunch" - where participants had yet to behave advantageously but were already showing skin conductance responses (which is a measure of sweat and arousal)

before turning the risky cards; a second phase - "hunch" - where participants couldn't yet verbally say which decks were more advantageous but were already acting advantageously. And a third "conceptual" phase where subjects were finally able to tell the experimenter what was going on.

This study raises all sorts of questions, but the most obvious one for our present purposes seems to be, again, that this is a case of functional behaviour which cannot be obviously explained in terms of conscious deliberation. Here it is worth introducing another distinction that will be helpful throughout the book: in many of the intuitively easy cases of expertise, habit, and automaticity that we have already mentioned, whether or not the agent is deliberating about her performance and whether or not the agent is presently conscious of her activity, the agent has at least direct access to her performance: she can retrieve the relevant information at will; she can focus or refocus her attention to the performance at will; she needs no external help[4]. Sometimes philosophers talk, in these cases, of dispositional awareness or access consciousness, to distinguish these cases from cases where an agent is wholly unaware of an aspect of her performance (more on this in the next chapter so don't worry if this goes a bit too quick here).

To illustrate genuine unawareness, take the following standard case (from Donald Davidson) which will feature again in more detail in later chapters: I board a plane marked as headed to 'London' with the intention of flying to London, England. Unbeknownst to me, the plane is actually headed to London, Ontario. I am unaware of a relevant feature of my action, namely that the plane I am boarding is actually headed to London, Ontario. And I have no direct access to that bit of information: I cannot retrieve it in my memory and it is also, we can imagine, not before my very eyes at this moment. This would be a case of genuine unawareness as opposed to being a case of dispositional awareness or access consciousness – as for example in the case in which I mindlessly follow the queue for the London, England plane. I am not thinking all the time about the fact that the plane I am about to board is headed to London, England; nor am I looking all the time at the screens displaying the information that the plane is in fact headed to London, England. But even though I am not occurrently aware of this fact at this very moment because I am not thinking about it, I am at least dispositionally aware of it (or access conscious of it) and that explains my mindless behaviour. So there seems to be an obvious difference between the case in which I notice that

[4] Here there would be interesting and important things to be said about the difference that the extended mind hypothesis makes to this kind of distinction but I will have to leave this one issue to the side here.

the plane is indeed headed to London, England at the one end of the spectrum and the case in which I, unbeknownst to me, board the plane to London, Ontario while thinking it is headed to London, England at the other hand of the spectrum. But, as Damasio's study shows, there is probably quite a lot of interesting and difficult agency between those two extremes; and at least some of this agency will be mindless.[5] And trying to establish what we should say about those sorts of cases is one of the main tasks of this book.

As the main topic of the book is exactly the explanatory aspect of mindless behaviour, here I don't want to say too much about this issue, rather just give a feel for its importance: the idea that at least parts of human agency are not necessarily conscious is a fundamental anthropological challenge on top of a challenge to philosophical theories of action. One important issue, for example, and one that this book does not discuss, is the relation between mindless human agency and animal actions. Whether or not animals can be said to truly act is an open question, but if one gives up – as this book suggests – on the thinking and conscious requirements on human agency, then this step could also be interpreted as one in the direction of animal agency. And indeed non-human animals are in one respect also experts: they can learn by repetition and improve performance. Is there a form of continuity between animal action and automatic (human) action? Here it is interesting to note the asymmetry between the genotypical and phenotypical levels: one could imagine that the natural history of behaviour is one where thinking before doing and conscious behaviour come, historically, after doing without thinking and unconscious behaviour; on the other hand at the individual level we observe the opposite: through practice and habit formation, agents start having to think less and less. A performance that used to require thinking and consciousness can then later be successfully completed mindlessly.

Let me mention another huge issue that is closely related to the topic of this book but that I again won't have the occasion to go into in any detail: there is a tradition, both in philosophy and in empirical psychology, of distinguishing between so-called rationalism and so-called sentimentalism; this tradition goes beyond the divide between theoretical and practical philosophy too in that both in talking about the justification of action and talking about the explanation of action people tend to divide themselves between rationalists and sentimentalists – traditionally, say, Kant would be

[5] Other cases that are in between the two clear extremes are the many experimental cases of automaticity to be found in the priming literature, many of which are discussed in the next chapter.

a prominent rationalist while Hume would be a prominent sentimentalist, just to drop some huge names there – in empirical psychology, think of the influential research conducted by Green or by Haidt on this traditional divide at the explanatory level. This issue is obviously related to the distinction between mindfulness and mindlessness that is at the centre of this book but I do not think that it should be confused with it: mindlessness, to be absolutely clear, does not imply a form of sentimentalism – while on the other hand the kind of intellectualism that I criticize in this book is often to be found in rationalists and I have myself mentioned Kant as opposed to Aristotle in this very introductory chapter.

So let me say, prudently, that the arguments in this book are supposed to be silent on the divide between rationalism and sentimentalism; which I would distinguish from the divide topical to this book between what one could call *intellectualism* and, for lack of a better word and out of respect towards our founding father, *Aristotelianism*.

3. Mindlessness: normative

It is natural to think that there is a close relation between agency and morality: for example, it is often suggested that someone can be praised or blamed only if she was conscious or aware of what she was doing. Diminished states of consciousness or lack of intention are, in many legislatures, either grounds for justification, excuse, or at least diminished sentences. As the *mens rea* principle suggests, the psychological state of the agent is a crucial element in the evaluation of her actions. Without getting into issues in legal philosophy, this is only meant to point out a first important issue in the normative evaluation of the phenomenon of mindlessness, and one that is also closely related to the point in the last section about whether mindless behaviours should count as proper full-blown actions.

This book, though, leaves all these issues of responsibility for mindless behaviour and evaluation of mindless performances to the side, concentrating on the theoretical problems to do with the explanation of mindless performances. That those issues cannot be covered in this book doesn't mean, though, that the author considers them any less important: think, for example, of the fascinating problem of when we should start praising or blaming the agent in the Iowa Gambling Test. Already by the time her hands start sweating, even though both her behaviour and her verbal reports indicate that she doesn't consciously realise that the decks are different? And would it be fair to blame an agent who alters her behaviour to her own advantage later than other agents, if none of these

agents can report, by that stage, verbally on the structure of the game and the quality of the decks?

And what about good and bad habits? Should the fact that a performance has become habitual constitute some sort of excuse for that behaviour? Imagine you do actually meet the old gentleman of the story with his umbrella on a mild day and you challenge him as to why he's carrying an umbrella on a mild day. Is his explanation in terms of habits and established practices going to count as a justification or at least an excuse? Carrying an umbrella is a pretty innocuous activity (normally, anyway), but you can easily think about habits that are not that innocuous. Imagine that a guest who you know to habitually speak very loudly wakes up your son sleeping upstairs. Should you show for this guest more understanding than for someone who normally speaks very softly but today is surprisingly loud and also wakes up your son?

Those are just stories, but at least the following happens to a lot of people and has maybe already happened to you too: you are driving on your usual route to work. This time, though, you are taking your partner to the airport and it just happens that in order to drive to the airport you need to drive part of your usual route to work. As you are driving on the familiar part of the route, your performance mindlessly adapts to your habitual practice of driving to work and you take the wrong turn: you haven't forgotten that you are driving to the airport; it's just that your habit was stronger and made you take the normal turn on your route to work. You mindlessly slipped into your habit: the mechanism, we can imagine, is similar to the umbrella case. It just happens that, statistically, the overwhelming majority of the time, when driving on this road, you are driving to work; that's why the kicking in of the habit is statistically efficacious but leads you astray this one time. But now the mechanism isn't really what interests us: rather, what should we say, normatively, about this case? Suppose your partner misses her flight because you took the wrong turn. Can you justify yourself or at least excuse yourself by explaining what happened and talking about acting automatically or out of habit? Is that a legitimate excuse or justification?

Here there are various possibilities that I cannot explore in any detail (a bit more on this in the concluding chapter though), but one could suggest at least the following:

1) Your mindless driving is a full-blown action with all its consequences – no excuse, even though you acted unintentionally or at least without the relevant intention and therefore your partner

should not assume any bad will on your part (more on this in the discussion of the role of intention in ethics in Chapter 7);

2) You didn't really mean to take the turn, your habit overpowered you. That's no justification but it is an excusing consideration: your partner should show some understanding;

3) The story about the economic advantage in the long term that we told about the umbrella applies here too: you are responsible for the establishment of a practice that is advantageous to you; you knew or at least should have known the negative consequences of the practice, which are, though, outweighed – at least objectively but probably also from your own subjective point of view - by its positive consequences: here the crucial counterfactual question may have to do with whether you would have been prepared to renounce the whole practice only to avoid your partner missing her flight this one time. And so even if now you acted mindlessly, that is really part of your overall plan to act economically and therefore you are to blame for the foreseeable consequences of your actions.

Those and similar considerations are clearly relevant to the evaluation of the phenomenon that is at the centre of this book; but I will leave these issues for future discussion and will not analyse them further in this volume (with two exceptions: Chapter 7 is dedicated to the role of intention in ethics; and the concluding Chapter 10 briefly takes up some of these questions about responsibility for mindless behaviour).[6]

4. Summary of the book

Let me briefly say what is to come in this volume: the book is divided into three parts: Part I looks at mindlessness from both a philosophical and psychological point of view. I present some of the more influential empirical evidence and discuss its philosophical relevance. In particular, in Chapter 2 I look at empirical work on habits and priming and ask what kind of consequences these empirical findings have for philosophical theories of action. In Chapter 3 I continue the discussion of Chapter 2, bringing the focus away from the psychological lab and into the real world of our daily lives, which are full of habits and automatic actions. Can the

[6] There is little ethics in this book, but readers who should be interested in my writings in ethics and applied ethics may look at the following: Di Nucci 2009b and 2009c; Di Nucci 2011c; Di Nucci 2012b; Di Nucci (forthcoming a-f); and Di Nucci (book manuscript).

influential causal theory of action put forward originally by Davidson and dominant in contemporary philosophy account for habitual and automatic actions? In Chapter 4 I look at the causal theory of action from a different point of view which complements my argument against it.

In Part II of this volume I discuss the consequences of mindless action for the idea that intention and action are closely related to each other: can there be action without intention? If intentions were necessary for action and mindless behaviour is not intended, then that's a big challenge to the normalization of mindless behaviour that motivates this book. That's why in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 I discuss, in particular, the so-called Simple View of intentional action, according to which an intentional action is necessarily intended: I argue against this view. Then in Chapter 7 I look at the normative side of the relation between action and intention and in particular at the idea that whether or not an action was intended makes a difference to the moral permissibility of that action.

Finally, in Part III, I look at the consequences of the empirical evidence I present and the theoretical arguments I put forward for the free will debate: in particular, in Chapter 8 I look at the relationship between the causal theory of action and a compatibilist approach to free will, arguing that giving up on the former does not imply having to give up the latter. Then in Chapter 9 I argue that empirical research on mindlessness presents no challenge to our free will by looking in particular at the example of research on priming. Finally, in the concluding Chapter 10 I briefly discuss some of the normative issues that emerge from this book and that I consider worthy of future work.

PART I

AUTOMATICITY

CHAPTER TWO

HABITS, PRIMING, ALIEFS AND THE EXPLANATION OF ACTION

There is a growing body of evidence on the influences of automatic and unconscious processes on our actions. Here I introduce some representative examples of this growing body of evidence, chosen so as to form a diverse group of related *mindless* phenomena: habits, skills, priming and nudges. I then argue that this evidence challenges traditional belief-desire-based approaches in the philosophy of action. I further discuss a recently proposed solution to this challenge, Gendler's *Alief*, finding it wanting. I conclude by sketching my own alternative solution, based on the old story of Buridan's ass.

1. The empirical case for automaticity

In a fascinating study on eating habits, consumption of fresh and stale popcorn at the cinema by habitual cinema-going popcorn consumers was tested: habitual popcorn consumers ate just as much one-week-old stale popcorn as fresh popcorn (Neal, Wood et. al. 2011). Those without the habit of eating popcorn at the movies ate more fresh popcorn than stale popcorn. Neal, Wood et al. refer to this sort of habitual behaviour as 'automatic', 'non-goal-dependent', and say that it is not under 'intentional control' (which once they refer to as "personal control" (2011: 9)).

Neal, Wood et. al. (2011) found that either an unusual environmental context (eating popcorns in a meeting room instead of a cinema) or a novel way of carrying out the habit (eating with the non-dominant hand) disrupted habitual performance, resulting in even the subjects with the cinema-going popcorn-eating habit eating more fresh than stale popcorn. This is taken to confirm their hypothesis that "habits should not be *activated* automatically outside of their typical performance context and should not be *executed* automatically when responses are performed in novel ways" (2011: 1). This suggests, then, that habits are normally both activated and executed *automatically*. What does it mean that habits are activated and executed automatically? Here is again Wendy Wood: "Cue-