

Habits as the Basis of Skilled Embodied Performance

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There is a long tradition in cognitive science of seeking to explain our capacity to execute even the most basic intelligent, skilled bodily performances by appeal to cognitive mechanisms that, in one way or another, involve mental representations. This presentation reviews of prominent proposals in this domain and identifies the philosophical assumptions that can make the positing of mental representations seem compelling, if not irresistible. It then reviews the deep explanatory problems that attend such accounts insofar as they are unable to overcome the Hard problem of Content (Hutto and Myin 2013, 2017). An alternative, enactivist proposal is advanced that rests on the idea that habits, not mental representations, might be able to do the required work: acting as a basis for skill embodied performance. In making this case, this presentation aims to set the record straight about special sort of intelligence exhibited by habitual doings. It defends an enactivist account of habitual doings which, at its core, depicts habits – despite lacking content – as flexible and adjustable modes of response that are world-directed and context-sensitive. So understood, habits are wholly unlike the exercise of blind mechanisms or mindless reflexes.