

The Problem of Habit

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Abstract

The following essay is an attempt to a) bridge the gap between habit in the ordinary sense of the word and the concept of habit as described by philosophers, using the various characteristics of habitual behaviors that shape daily life as a clue and b) clarify what it means to question the meaning of habit in general.

What philosophers from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas, to Ravaisson, to Dewey have regarded as habit is very different from the common usage of the noun “habit.” The word “habit” commonly refers to automatically repetitive, nonreflective behavior that does not require the intervention of the will. In contrast, philosophers have regarded the essence of habit to be the free exercise of advanced abilities that require concentration and tension.

The following essay confirms that 1) habits are a way of returning to ourselves and are impossible to imitate, 2) we should distinguish habits from “routines” and “rituals,” and 3) the problem of the formation of habit is one of “transcendence.”

1. The Common Understanding of Habit and the Concept of Habit in Philosophy

1.1. The role of habit in everyday life

Habit is an idea that is familiar to all of us. When we see the word “habit,” we all have some concrete examples in our minds. We can say that most of our daily lives are shaped by a wide variety of habits, from exercise, diet, and language to drinking, smoking, and taking stimulants.

The commonsensical belief is that habits are unique to a person and closely correlate with his or her personality and that, moreover, habits can be one of the signs that distinguish a person from others. Having no habits can be seen as having no personality. Further, it is impossible to live without any habits in the first place. If a person has no habits, he or she must constantly be judging, choosing, and deciding from morning to night, with no time to rest. William James put it this way:

There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work, are subjects of express volitional deliberation. Full half the time of such a man goes to the deciding, or regretting, of matters which ought to be so ingrained in him as practically not to exist for his consciousness at all (James 122).

1.2. The extent to which philosophers define the term “habit”

Habits appear in our ordinary existence; we often carry out our daily lives according to them. In the 2,600 years of history of Western philosophy, from ancient times to the present, there has, however, been little thematic coverage of the phenomena that precisely correspond to the common usage of the word “habit.”

Nevertheless, philosophers have not been entirely silent about what we call “habit” today. Ancient and medieval philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas and modern ones such as Maine de Biran, Ravaisson, Bergson, Dewey, and James, quoted above, have all devoted many words to elucidate the meaning of habit. What philosophers refer to as a habit, however, appears to be subtly but crucially different from what modern sensibility recognizes as one. That is, most traits of what philosophers call “habit” (with the rare exception of a few texts by Maine de Biran and Ravaisson) do not apply to the idea of habit that we commonly perceive.

1.2.1. Thomas Aquinas

For example, when Thomas Aquinas speaks of habit (*habitus*), he always has in mind the various virtues and vices considered typical of habits, not the habit of smoking, eating, or walking. Similar to Aristotle, Aquinas includes ethical (*moralis*) virtues, such as courage, justice, temperance, and prudence, in habits. Moreover, according to Aquinas, science (*scientia*) and the ability of logical thinking, metaphysical insight, and grace must also be considered as intellectual (*intellectualis*) [Thomas p.38ff(1a2ae57.1)]. Further he says that, the nature and significance of these intellectual virtues fall within the theory of habit. This way of defining habit does not, however, mesh with our current thinking. Then again, it is possible to explain “virtue” in the moral sense, even without the resistance to seeing it as typical of habit. Aristotle put it this way:

Again, of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity (this is plain in the case of the senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but on the contrary, we had them before we used them, and did not come to have them by using them); but excellences we get by first exercising them, as happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do, we learn by doing, e.g., men become builders building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts [Aristotle 1743(1103b1)].

A person is “righteous” when he or she repeatedly behaves in a way that reflects the virtue of justice. In other words, a person is righteous when righteous behavior becomes a habit (in the ordinary understanding of the word) for him or her. In this sense, moral virtue can be considered a habit.

It is, however, difficult to regard “intellectual” virtue as a habit. That is because the kind of high intellectual ability that Aquinas envisions would require concentration and tension to be exercised, if at all, repeatedly. In contrast, what we typically consider to be “habits,” can be carried out without such concentration and tension.

1.2.2. James and Dewey

Some of the things that James and Dewey, more modern philosophers, call as “habits” are also outside the scope of what we consider “habit” in other ways. For example, Dewey attributes to habits those actions and behaviors that are essential to the survival of man as an organism, such as walking, sleeping, and eating (Dewey 36f). For James, the problem of the formation of habit was first and foremost a problem of plasticity of the cerebrum and nervous tissue (James 106ff).

Most of us indeed have some kind of walking, sleeping, and eating habits; however, these are not formed simply, for example, by just “getting sleep”; they are habitual behaviors built up over time, such as “going to bed early” and “staying up late.” Likewise, “eating” is usually not considered a habit in itself. Instead, the way we eat, such as consuming regular or nutritious meals, is more of a habit. It is possible to irregularly sleep and irregularly eat; however, it is impossible to not sleep or not eat. As Aristotle pointed out in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1742(1103a17)), anything that we cannot do any other way cannot be considered a habit. Sleeping and eating are, therefore, not habits in the usual sense.

A philosophical study of habit must not ignore the ideas of Thomas, Dewey, and Ravaisson. They seek the epitome of habit in phenomena that are different from the messy actions and ways of thinking that shape our daily lives, but this does not mean that their speculations are invalid.

Our lives are not only governed by habits, but also we form our own attitudes toward them. Philosophers’ theories of habit, as shown later, target habits as part of our existence and, in this sense, they seem to be the ones that should always be referred to in attempts to question the meaning of habit.

Nevertheless, to do justice to the philosophers’ ideas, an understanding of habit must begin first and foremost with an identification of the messy, habitual behaviors that shape our daily lives and what we expect from them.

2. The Three Characteristics of Habit

By paying attention to the everyday use of the noun “habit” or expressions such as “I usually ...,” we can see that the actions and thoughts that are commonly thought

of as habits have three characteristics: automatic, repetitive, and nonreflective. The appearance of these three properties in an action or thought distinguishes it as a “habit.”

2.1. Automatically (or mechanically) performed

When a behavior is said to be “habitual,” it is usually automatically carried out, without being forced. In other words, to carry out something as a habit is to do it without considering all the alternatives.

I make it my “habit” to have a cup of coffee first thing when I wake up every morning. That means that I wake up and make coffee as a series of actions like a machine, without considering the possibility of drinking something other than coffee or taking a bath without drinking coffee. James describes this as follows:

One may state this abstractly thus: If an act requires for its execution a chain, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, etc., of successive nervous events, then in the first performances of the action the conscious will must choose each of these events from a number of wrong alternatives that tend to present themselves; but habit soon brings it about that each event calls up its own appropriate successor without any alternative offering itself, and without any reference to the conscious will, until at last the whole chain, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, rattles itself off as soon as A occurs, just as if A and the rest of the chain were fused into a continuous stream (James 114).

The situation is also the same for our thoughts. For example, if I have the (wrong) “habit” of evaluating people’s worth based on their educational background, then, when I meet someone for the first time, the first question that comes to my mind is, “What university is he or she from?” As long as it is my “habit” to evaluate others based on their educational background, this question will automatically come to mind. In other words, coming up with such a question is not, in and of itself, an act of will. Moreover, unless some coincidence prevents me from reflecting on this habit in my behavior, my first question to the person before me would be, “What university are you from?”

2.2. Endless repetition

It is commonly believed that an act must be performed not just once, but repeated a certain number of times or over a certain period to be recognized as a habit. If I work out just once, this is not enough for me to declare that I usually work out. The statement “I usually work out” will only be valid if I continue to work out every day or every week, basically without a fixed deadline.

The same is valid for thoughts. A thought that governs someone’s behavior becomes a “tendency” or a “habit” when it repeatedly appears in various situations or when it is not the first time. For example, a “soccer fanatic” is not just someone who professes to like soccer. When someone continuously and repeatedly tends to explain various events by comparing them to soccer, he or she can be identified as a “soccer fanatic.”

The protagonist of Cervantes’s long novel *Don Quixote* indulges in medieval tales of chivalry. As a result, he becomes trapped in the delusion that he is a medieval knight and begins to act on this delusion. We can, thus, say that this story depicts a situation that occurs when the “habit” of thinking takes over and extends, and endlessly repeats itself, hijacking the perception of reality.

2.3. Unaware and uncontrollable habits

When mechanically repetitive behaviors are called “habits,” the person who performs such habitual behaviors is usually unaware of the reasons for performing them each time. When asked why, he or she may not always be able to answer this question. Therefore, when this aspect of habit is emphasized, those of us whose lives are governed by habit will be considered “slaves of habit.”

For example, while there are several coffee shops along the road I take from my home to my office, there is only one of them where I actually stop by every morning on my way to work. In this case, I can say that it is my “habit” to stop by a particular coffee shop on my way to work. Every time I stop by this shop, however, I do not consider why I stopped here instead of other shops. When others ask me why I stopped by that shop, I may not be able to give them a clear enough answer because I cannot recall why I decided to do so in the first place. It is even possible that all I can give is a hollow answer: “Because this is my habit.”

Moreover, habitual behaviors carried out in a nonreflective manner because of their nonreflective nature are often maintained even when the situation or environment changes. As a result, the behavior is no longer compatible with the situation or environment. For example, when I take the train to and from my home and office, I choose one of the two routes, A or B. When I first started commuting to this office, I decided on route A because it was cheaper than B, and I commuted through it for many years. Later, however, the railroad companies revised their fares, resulting in the fare on the B line becoming cheaper than the A line. Despite this, I continued to use route A for commuting. While I first chose the A line because it was cheaper than the B line, I eventually forgot this reason. By then, however, the habit of using route A was substantialized; this substantialized habit irrationally distorted my behavior.

Habits can include undesirable repeated behaviors for unknown reasons and forgotten causes. That is the case with addiction to various substances and behaviors. For example, let us say that I continue to eat large amounts of sweets every day, although I am well aware that excessive sugar intake is detrimental to my health. Here, even if I want to change my behavior, I am unable to do so. We can, thus, say that this addiction is a bad habit.

2.4. Conventions, customs, and manners also have three characteristics

These three characteristics that are recognized in “habit” in the ordinary sense of the word are certainly not the only characteristics of “habits” that shape the lives of individuals. Conventions, practices, customs, and manners that bind social groups and act as normative equivalents also have the same characteristics. Dewey does not recognize any essential distinction between them but insists that they be treated the same (55).

The traditional and ceremonial events found in any social group are usually the result of some reasonably understandable circumstances. For example, in Japan, a *jichinsai* (ground-breaking ceremony) is usually held before constructing a new building. The ceremony was initially a ritual of obtaining permission for construction from the deity who is supposed to protect the land, and of praying for safety during the construction work. It is a traditional custom that has been practiced before each construction project for more than a thousand years since the Asuka period. It is,

of course, not a legal requirement to hold a jichinsai. The ceremony is occasionally omitted in modern times because it is regarded as a mere superstition.

Nevertheless, in reality, if the number of people involved in a construction project increases to a certain extent, a ground-breaking ceremony is “supposed” to be held as a matter of custom. If the ground-breaking ceremony does not occur, an explanation of the reason will be necessary. As long as we assume the modern view of nature dominated by science, however, it is impossible to rationally explain the necessity of the ground-breaking ceremony. In this sense, therefore, the ground-breaking ceremony is a custom.

Among such conventions, practices, customs, and manners, those that are particularly irrational, binding on social groups, and detrimental to the well-being of every one of us are usually referred to as a “tired tradition.”

2.5. Habituation, when the passive nature of a habit is emphasized

A concept related to habit is the idea of habituation (*consuetudo*). Unlike habit, however, habituation refers to a regular behavior or thought that is forced by the external environment, is passively formed in the effort to adapt to this environment, and has become “familiar,” so to speak.

For example, one day, a large cardboard box was placed in the middle of the corridor of my apartment building, blocking the narrow passageway. No one knew why. Then, not knowing what was in the box, but unable to decide whether they should dispose of it or not, the apartment inhabitants started to walk back and forth through the small gap left between the box and the wall on either side. At first, the box attracted the attention of the residents who talked about it whenever they exchanged greetings. After a few days, however, everyone “got used” to the new situation of a cardboard box blocking the hallway and stopped paying attention to it. The residents were no longer bothered by the fact that a large cardboard box was blocking the corridor and had become habituated to acting on this fact.

In a similar vein, for example, a craftsman’s effort to master a new tool and acquire the skills that are necessary to use it is a result of positive adaptation to the environment. This positive habituation is a result of the craftsman’s familiarity with the tool. Such habituation is appropriately called “mastery.”

Unlike actively acquired habits, such as the regularity of sleep and exercise,

there are generally bad habits of which addiction, as mentioned above, is an example. Some of the behaviors that are considered bad habits are also created by habituation. These can include the consumption of stimulants and alcohol to relieve stress in daily life or the prolonged submersion in video games to escape from reality. Many of the things that interfere with healthy everyday life are either misadaptations to situations and environments or habituation in a negative sense.

Learned helplessness, which is a frequent topic in positive psychology, can also be said to be a form of habituation (Seligman 35ff). Learned helplessness refers to a state in which attempts to realize a particular goal are repeatedly unsuccessful because of some obstacle; the effort to realize this goal is abandoned, and the will to realize the goal is not restored even after the obstacle is removed.

It is true that automatic, mechanical, nonreflective, repetitive behaviors and thoughts, once acquired as habits, may prevent us from flexibly responding to changes in the environment and circumstances. The idea that the behavior is “beyond one’s control” is typical of learned helplessness, and it is often seen as one of the signs that distinguish a habit from other behavior.

3. Confusion and Limitations of the Common Understanding of “Habit”

If we accept the common understanding of habit as so far described, it is possible to distinguish habit from other behavior based on three signs: a habit is an automatic action that does not require tension or concentration to carry out, an act that is repeated without a fixed number of times or a fixed deadline, and a behavior whose reasons for being habitual are not always clear or whose reasons deviate from reality.

We pay attention to behaviors and thoughts that repeatedly appear in our, as well as others’, daily lives and call them “habits.” If habitual behavior reflects the being of the person who has acquired the habit, however, then what we refer to as “habit” should not be the behavior or thought itself but the being of the person reflected in such behavior or thought. Furthermore, certain behaviors and thoughts can only be derivatively named as “habits” in so far as they express our being.

It is impossible to determine whether behavior or thought is a habit or not by separately observing it from other behaviors or thoughts that are classified as habits by common sense. That is because there is no such thing as behavior or thought that

could only be observed as a habit^[1].

It is true that it is possible that something is a habit when it is repeatedly carried out in an automatic, mechanical, and nonreflective manner. It is also possible, however, that it is a willful action situated in the process of a “habit-forming” effort. Alternatively, it could be that the same person performed the same behavior multiple times because of some accidental circumstances. For example, I forcibly get up early every morning from Monday to Friday because of different external circumstances; however, I may just have been unlucky enough to have had to get up early for five days in a row; this does not qualify as habit-forming.

Moreover, when we consider Aristotle, Thomas, Dewey, and others on the meaning of habit from this perspective, we may make the following distinction: If behaviors and thoughts that reflect a person’s nature are “habits,” then actions that are merely mechanically repetitive should be called “daily routines” or “daily rituals” rather than habits.

For example, Kierkegaard is reported to have made it a daily “habit” to drink a cup of strong coffee with much sugar (more precisely, a cup of sugar dissolved in strong coffee) (Garff 291). This repetitive behavior is likely just one of the many anecdotes about Kierkegaard’s eccentricities that has nothing to do with the historical significance of his writings. In that case, it should be called a mere “eccentricity” rather than a habit.

Furthermore, even if it is a habit in the truest sense of the word (as described above), all habits are infinitely different from person to person (even if they are given the same name, for example, “walk”). Thus, although there is some precedent or example, it should essentially defy mechanical imitation. In other words, habits must be understood as something that each individual can only create through trial and error.

If habits essentially make up the way each person is and if habitual behavior reflects his or her nature, then the formation of habit is a constant effort to return to oneself to overcome one’s current situation and become one’s true self. In this sense, we can say that the problem of habit is essentially a problem of transcendence or integrity, and the philosophers’ ideas of the same must be understood and evaluated from this perspective.

In his work, *The Laughter*, Bergson repeatedly emphasizes the typical characteristics of “mechanical inelasticity” (*raideur de mécanique*) or “distraction”

(distraction of tension) in the actions and language that provoke laughter. According to Bergson, this “mechanical inelasticity” is the essence of the “automatic action” (automatisme) of “habit” (habitude), which is distinct from the “smoothness” (souplesse), “flexibility” (flexibilité), and “mobility” (mobilité) of the original way of life (11 et passim). Thus, at least in *The Laughter*, Bergson shares the same framework of understanding of habit as Maine de Biran and Ravaisson, and we should evaluate his views from this perspective.

However, habit is nothing but the being for each person; the formation of habit is an effort to return to oneself; the meaning of habit is a minor issue that forms part of the more significant issue of “transcendence.” So, what we must recognize, therefore, in habit is not “mechanical inelasticity,” “automatic action,” or “distraction of tension,” but, on the contrary, a tension-filled act infused with a kind of elegance made up of smoothness, flexibility, and mobility.

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Notes

- [1] From this understanding of habit, I foresee two conclusions: that habit cannot be regarded as some embodied action and that habit is not experienceable in itself. Still, I will leave that for another time.