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Habit and Automatism
Two Opposite Paths

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Abstract This essay explores different ways of understanding the relationship between habit and automatism, starting from the notion of 'spontaneity' implied in the double law of habit. The first path highlights the risks of automatism, viewing it as a mechanical and passive mode of action, as seen in the works of Maine de Biran, Ribot, and Dumont. The second path, which originates in the nineteenth century with Ravaisson and Fouillée, suggests a different view of habit and automatism. In the twentieth century, this perspective will reemerge in various forms in the thought of Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, Deleuze, and Guattari.

Keywords Habit. Spontaneity. Automatism. Sensibility. French Philosophy.

Sommario 1.Introduction. – 2.The Temptation of Mechanistic Reductionism. – 3.A Different Perspective: From Ravaisson to Guattari. – 4.Conclusions.

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1 Introduction

Habit and automatism are concepts that are often so closely related that they tend to be confused with one another. Historically, in habit theories, automatism – understood as ease, spontaneity, fluidity – consistently appears as the primary consequence of the very exercise of habit. This is especially true in the case of the philosophies of habit, which, despite their differing foundations (spiritualist, positivist, etc.), developed in the French intellectual tradition throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. From this perspective, the French philosophy of the time is characterized by a precise theoretical formulation that describes the effects of habit on sensitivity and action: the so-called double law of habit (*double loi de l'habitude*).

Early discussions surrounding the double law of habit can be traced to the works of thinkers such as Butler (1736) and Bichat ([1800]1827) in the eighteenth century, but it is not until the nineteenth century, with the contributions of Maine de Biran ([1802]1987) and later Ravaisson ([1838]2008), that the double law is fully articulated. The law in itself merely describes the effects of a phenomenon that can be defined as 'habituation' but, in fact, its interpretation can take different directions, emphasizing either the aspects of passivity or those of activity.

The aim of this essay is to provide an overview of the forms that the relationship between habit and the notion of automatism can take, starting from the double law. These can be summarized under two main categories. The first coincides with a 'negative' interpretation of automatism, as a material and mechanical mode of sensitivity and action, which would thus represent an inherent risk in the very exercise of habit. This path, initially traced by Maine de Biran, found great success within the associationist psychology of Ribot and the materialistic-positivist philosophy, such as that of Léon Dumont. The second category, on the other hand, corresponds to a way of thinking about habit as a plastic mode of engagement with the environment, in relation to which the very notion of automatism may acquire different meanings. This is a path traced by Ravaisson and Fouillée in the nineteenth century, which, after being long abandoned, resurfaces in the twentieth century in various forms, with the thought of Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, Deleuze, and Guattari.

The authors belonging to each path are undoubtedly far more numerous than those that will appear in this essay. The selection of authors and works has therefore been made without any claim to exhaustiveness, but with the intent of offering a comprehensive overview of the two opposing ways of thinking about habit and automatism present in France between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

2 The Temptation of Mechanistic Reductionism

Although the specific expression *double loi de l'habitude* was first used by Ravaisson, the meaning expressed by the law is already found fully accomplished in the formulation offered in 1802 by Maine de Biran. Indeed, it is with Maine de Biran that our journey begins. Contrary to what has been suggested by critics,[1] Ravaisson's formulation is not distinguished by greater completeness than that of his predecessor, it simply takes a diametrically opposite perspective.

The fundamental difference between the two French philosophers – at least from the perspective taken by this article – lies in Maine de Biran's use of the term 'automatism', which is completely absent in the Ravaissonian text on habit (Ravaisson [1838]2008). The ontological-metaphysical framework that characterizes Ravaisson's thought also influences the nuance of meaning attributed to habit. Although Ravaisson emphasizes – and is among the first to give exceptional momentum to – the idea of spontaneity,[2] his interpretation of habit as an ontological principle, as a bridge between Nature and Spirit, 'rescues' habit from the risk of its reduction to mere mechanistic automatism. This latter connotation of the term, by contrast, is explicitly present in Biran's mémoire, where still young and intellectually indebted to idéologie, he addresses the problem of habit from a strictly psychophysiological perspective.

In the first version of the *mémoire* devoted to the influence of habit on thought, Maine de Biran compares habitual actions to *tics* that precede and exclude the intervention of thought:

> These habit tics [*tics d'habitude*] which we would try to change once they have taken roots, but in vain, because one needs to think about them to change them, and instead automatic action comes before, and excludes, thinking.[3] (Maine de Biran [1802]1987, 72)

The habitual movements, described in relation to the use of the "vocal instrument," are indeed distinguished by their "lightness, promptness" and in this consists precisely "the automatism of habitual movements" (Maine de Biran [1802]1987, 227).

At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, something very specific occurred that contributed to consolidating the link between habit and a certain idea of automatism. It is possible to trace at least two roots of this event: one scientific and the other more

1 Wright 2011; Piazza 2018, 171-84.

2 On the concept of Ravaisson's spontaneity in relation to the theme of madness refer to Vincenti 2019.

3 All translations are by the author unless otherwise stated.

distinctly philosophical, both of which together contributed to the increasing diffusion of a mechanistic – and therefore reductionist – definition of habit.

On the scientific front, the discovery of the existence of the so-called reflex arc in the animal and human nervous system played a crucial role, which, as Bennett writes:

> from its "discovery" in the late eighteenth century, contributed to the development of a conception of habit as a form of involuntary repetition giving rise to all manner of addictions. (Bennett 2023, 20)

This idea, discovered and developed in German and English areas,[4] however, would only reach France later, thanks to the work of pioneers in physiology such as François Magendie and Claude Bernard, deeply influencing psychopathology through the research of Jean-Martin Charcot.

On the philosophical front, there was the revival of empiricism – which in France came to be known as *phénoménisme* – promoted by Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer. In particular, they brought about a true physiological transformation of the principle of the association of ideas. As Bennett observes, at that time, the association of ideas shifted "from the mind to the body's physiological and neurological processes" (Bennett 2023, 90). A shift that, according to Robert Young, should be attributed to the particular emphasis Alexander Bain placed on the motility of the body and the effects it generated. In this way, associationist psychology, which initially emerged as an epistemological science, became "a psychophysical science of feeling, knowing, and willing" in which "knowing was the result of experiences consequent upon doing" (Young 1970, 120).

However, several decades earlier, Maine de Biran had already highlighted the centrality of bodily motility in the constitution of experience in general, as well as in the targeted explanation of the functioning of habit (cf. Bennett 2023, 95). In his 1802 *mémoire*, Biran recognizes movement as the foundation for the impression of resistance and, consequently, of effort, upon which he builds his entire

4 "In 1771 Johann August Unzer published his *Principles of Physiology*, which, although not using the term, proposed an early version of the logic of the reflex arc in severing the relations between voluntary and involuntary motion as sensory impressions are reflected away from the brain to their point of origin. […] The formalization of the experimental evidence of vivisection and of clinical trials on humans into a theory of the reflex arc came later, most notably in the 1830s with Marshall Hall's conception of the 'excitomotory' system as a nervous-muscular system that was structurally and functionally independent of the brain as the seat of consciousness and volition" (Bennett 2023, 78-9).

argument, including the law that governs the effects of habit.[5] Therefore, even before the rise of neo-empiricism – which also had a significant influence in France – and prior to the spread of reflex arc studies in France (Magendie 1816; Bernard 1878-79; Charcot [1872-73] 2009), Maine de Biran initiated a particular process of shift that, by transferring the notion of habit from epistemology to psychophysiology, would increasingly determine its overlap with the automatism of action and behavior.

For Biran, there exists a law of habit related to the degradation of receptivity, which is mirrored by a second law, concerning the increasing ease of activity:

> This fugacity, this degradation of every sensory effect, thus seems to be a law of habit as constant, as general as that of the increasing rapidity and ease of the products of our motor force. (Maine de Biran [1802]1987, 203)

While the sensory determination that depends on the "repeated impulse from the same external cause" corresponds to a sensation that, whenever it is repeated, is "weaker, less affective" (Maine de Biran [1802]1987, 148), on the other hand, the motor determination, as tendency to repeat an action or movement, corresponds to an effort that, when repeated, is characterized by "a greater degree of ease" (Maine de Biran [1802]1987, 149).

According to Biran, from the sensory organs, the influence of habit applies – I would say almost analogically – to all our faculties, always producing the same effect: a decrease in receptivity in favor of an increase in activity. This is "a very important aspect of habit", as Dumont writes seventy years later, recognizing the originality of Biran's position precisely in having shown that "under the influence of repetition, all our faculties develop and improve as movements, while they weaken and degrade as *feelings*" (Dumont [1876]2019, 75).

Biran's formulation of the double law is primarily influenced by the *idéologues*, who, without explicitly speaking of the 'law of habit', focused on noting the effects of repetition on action and,[6] secondly, the centrality attributed to the motility of the body. These two aspects, together, contribute to depicting habit primarily as a form of action (first and foremost corporeal action), and particularly as an action destined to transform into automatism.

5 Biran and Biranism occupy a central role in the development of theories of 'effort' in France. An important in-depth examination of this can be found in Madinier 1938.

6 See Cabanis (1798, 195) and Destutt de Tracy (1801, 226-7).

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> When the repetition of the same acts of any kind has brought them to that degree of promptness, ease, and automatism, so to speak, which we call habit, the state of the individual in their execution is a kind of self-forgetfulness. (Maine de Biran [1802]1987, 31)

This shift begins to show its effects clearly in France in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Biran's *mémoire* is already considered a 'classic' of contemporary philosophy of habit.[7] For instance, Léon Dumont, philosopher and physiologist,[8] who was well acquainted with Biran's thought, in his 1876 work, describes the tendency of habit, as the execution of an act, to generate a form of automatism:

> As habit is, as we have shown, an accumulation of force, excitation is only useful to supply the organ with what it still lacks for the execution of the act. When nothing is lacking, excitation becomes superfluous, and in this case, the act can outlive the causes that gave rise to it: this is when automatism appears. (Dumont [1876]2019, 85)

We find something quite similar, approximately eighty years later, in the writings of associationist psychophysiology, which arrived at this type of interpretation through the mediation of alienists such as Jules Baillarger and Moreau de Tours, who had used the term automatism in the wake of Biran's analyses to explain certain pathological phenomena related to madness (cf. Piazza; Vincenti 2023, 28). Ribot, for example, in his text on the diseases of the will, divides a person's activity, or "its power to produce an act", into three levels: the first, the lowest rung of activity, is that of "automatic actions, simple or compound reflexes, habits" (Ribot 1883, 116). Ribot uses the two expressions "automatic actions" and "habits" as synonyms: In this case, automatism no longer constitutes a possible consequence of habit but rather habit itself.

One might object, however, that Ribot and Dumont share the same mechanistic-materialistic approach, and that this equivalence between habit and automatism is nothing more than a circumscribed radicalization of a tendency that was implicitly present from the outset in Biran's anti-metaphysical stance. Nevertheless, the same 'reductionist' tendency can also be observed in contexts that are, in this

7 This is evidenced by the fact that Biran's work is also known to William James, who cites it, in connection with the problem of effort, in a text dating from that very period (James 1880).

8 Léon Dumont (1837-77) conducted two decades of independent and intensive research, outside institutions and in a variety of fields. He was read and criticized by major thinkers such as William James, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson and Luigi Pirandello. Cf. Dromelet 2019, 7-10.

respect, more moderate. Albert Lemoine, for instance, when discussing the relationship between habit and will, unhesitatingly notes how the majority of voluntary acts are removed from the domain of the will and rendered automatic by habit (Lemoine 1875, 47). Moreover, ten years later, Élie Rabier – editor of Lemoine's posthumous work on habit and instinct (Lemoine 1875) – in a manual for teaching philosophy in schools, while describing the effects of habit on action, speaks of an "increasing automatism" and how the act, due to habit, becomes "somewhat automatic" (Rabier 1884, 579).

This 'reductionist' tendency, which had taken hold in French philosophy of the time, would retrospectively come to subsume Ravaisson as well. Although he was far removed from a mechanistic conception of automatism as mere uncontrolled reaction, later interpretations of his thought would unjustly attribute such a view to him. This is precisely what emerges from the speech given by Bergson in 1904 for his election to the *Académie des Sciences morales et politiques*, as successor to Ravaisson himself. On that occasion Bergson, while denying that Ravaisson's conception of habit coincides with pure mechanism, nonetheless ends up defining it as a form of activity, precisely as a "fossilized residue of spiritual activity" which, having passed from consciousness to unconsciousness, has become automatic.

> This is because the motor habit, once formed, is a mechanism, a series of mutually determining movements: it is that part of us that is inserted into nature, and which coincides with nature; it is nature itself. Now, our inner experience shows us that habit is an activity that has passed, by insensible degrees, from consciousness to unconsciousness and from will to automatism. [...] Habit thus gives us a vivid demonstration of the truth that mechanism is not self-sufficient: it is, so to speak, no more than the fossilized residue of spiritual activity. (Bergson 1934, 267)

As Sinclair points out, there is indeed a conception of automatism within Ravaisson's philosophy, but it is profoundly different from the one described by Bergson. In the case of the spiritualist philosopher, Sinclair refers to a "strong conception of automaticity". This means that the automatism involving habit in Ravaisson's system would in no way coincide with a mechanical succession of acts, but with "a power or capacity that can bring itself, without external stimuli, to its own realization" (Sinclair 2019, 59). It is precisely this aspect that Bergson seems not to grasp, ultimately attributing to his master the

position that he sought to counter.[9]

It is reasonable to think that the affirmation of the double law contributed to highlighting the idea of an equivalence between habit and this sense of automatism. In a somewhat paradoxical way, what brings out the mechanically automatic nature of habit is not so much the side of *passivity* – namely the description of a fading sensibility – but rather that of *activity*. This idea of automatism, in fact, is constituted precisely from the stigmatization of an ever-increasing spontaneity, nurtured by the virtues of habit. It is therefore in the luminous idea of spontaneity that the darkness of automatism is hidden.[10] Were our inquiry to conclude at this juncture, the maxim to be drawn from these analyses – and, in many instances, the sole surviving thread of the broader nineteenth-century debate – would hold that habit is inevitably destined to crystallize into automatic reaction, a tendency that must first be resisted and subsequently corrected. Maine de Biran had already articulated this concern, asserting that "the individual must be determined to repeat with intention everything he has done before out of habit" (Maine de Biran [1802] 1987, 217), thereby demonstrating that he himself was not immune to this kind of reductionist interpretation.

3 A Different Perspective: From Ravaisson to Guattari

During the early decades of the twentieth century, this trend is reversed (cf. Piazza 2025, 10-2). The context, both in general terms and from a strictly philosophical point of view, has undergone a profound transformation. Philosophy, in fact, witnesses the development of psychology as a fully autonomous science and, above all, grapples with the emergence and spread of phenomenology, which will have a profound influence on the more contemporary ways of thinking about habit. Alongside the success of behaviorism – which reduces habit to a mere automatic reflex – new theories begin to emerge, with Husserl in Europe and, across the Atlantic, with Dewey and Mead. In France, as Grosz (2013) points out, the true shift in perspective occurs first with Bergson and later with Deleuze – but to these names, we can also add those of Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, and Guattari. While acknowledging the proximity of habit to automatism, this new perspective distances itself from any reductionist inclination and seeks to

9 As Sinclair recalls (2019, 70) "the basic intention of Ravaisson's reflection […] is precisely to overturn the classically modern conception of habit as a 'mechanical' principle of action".

10 Only that which is spontaneous can escape the control of will and consciousness, endlessly and blindly repeating what has been willed only once.

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describe habit as a plastic mode of interaction with the environment, capable of refining both sensitivity and consciousness. Consequently, the notion of automatism is also transformed, taking on a different meaning and, in some cases, a positive connotation.

However, the traces of this twentieth-century path can already be found in the nineteenth century. First and foremost, in Ravaisson, as we have seen through Sinclair, but also as highlighted by Grosz herself. The double law, according to Ravaisson, establishes that a decrease in sensibility corresponds to an increased inclination to act, but, as Grosz writes:

> Thus habit does not arrest or mechanize, or reduce consciousness to unconsciousness or automatism; rather, it brings about a new kind of consciousness, one not aware of itself but prone to act, that is activated by the possibility of its acting, that knows but cannot know that it knows. (Grosz 2013, 223)

Undoubtedly influenced by Ravaisson's thought, a few decades later, Alfred Fouillée – philosopher of the 'ideas-forces' whose philosophical project aimed to reconcile science and metaphysics, surpassing positivist biologism – adopts an even more explicit and radical position. Like his predecessors, Fouillée shares the formulation of the double law, but in terms of its consequences, he takes a further step. While agreeing that, in accordance with the law of least effort and greatest pleasure, the evolution of the body is governed by a general tendency toward automatism, Fouillée is convinced that this does not imply any impoverishment of consciousness. On this point, he distinguishes himself from both spiritualism and psychophysiology: not only does he reject the mechanistic interpretation often attributed to habit, but he goes even further, claiming the expansive power of consciousness inherent in the automatism of habit. A power that can only be appreciated by making a careful distinction between the physiological processes associated with habit and their results in consciousness. It is true that the sensation corresponding to a particular movement, which becomes automatic with habit, weakens – Fouillée does not deny the double law – but in his view, this is not sufficient to explain the phenomenon of habit in its entirety. An additional fact must be considered. In correspondence with the automatism that takes hold with habit, the possibility for an expansion of consciousness and sensibility becomes feasible.

> If evolution seems to extend on one side the realm of unconsciousness, it is in order to expand on the other side the realm of consciousness itself: the masterpieces of its subtle mechanism have the effect of making possible an even subtler sensibility. (Fouillée 1885, 162)

Only a few years later, the same process would be described in an important work of psychology by Pierre Janet (1889) and would take the name of 'psychological automatism' (*automatisme psychologique*). It is precisely in this connection between automatism and habit that Janet identifies a potential growth, the condition for the possibility of inner progress.

> The facility that habit provides us for performing intelligent acts without personal perception allow us to make new progress and employ our intelligence in higher works: this psychological automatism is the condition of our progress. (Janet 1889, 464).

Now, without reiterating what has already been thoroughly observed by Grosz, we shall seek to highlight some additional elements along this alternative path taken by habit in the twentieth century. Let us briefly return to Deleuze, whose conception of repetition marks a decisive turning point in the emergence of a more modern understanding of habit.[11] In *Difference and Repetition*, habit represents a complex concept about which repetition concerns not so much action as contemplation:

> When we say that habit is a contraction we are speaking not of an instantaneous action that combines with another to form an element of repetition, but rather of the fusion of that repetition in the contemplating mind. […] It is simultaneously through contraction that we are habits, but through contemplation that we contract. (Deleuze 1995, 74)

Furthermore, habit pertains to the domain of passivity, but in a quite distinct way from simple receptivity as understood by physiology.

> The passive self is not defined simply by receptivity – that is, by means of the capacity to experience sensations – but by virtue of the contractile contemplation which constitutes the organism itself before it constitutes the sensations. (Deleuze 1995, 78)

Here, the perhaps most intriguing aspect of Deleuze's early reflections comes to the fore: namely, the relationship between habit and identity, and the problem of the continuity of the self. Through the

11 As Bennett (2023, 26) notes: "Since then, Deleuze's interpretation of repetition as, far from necessarily leading to a reproduction of the same, constituting an essential aspect of processes of differentiation has been worked through in the varied engagements defining Elizabeth Grosz's wayward tradition that have restored to habit the more positive assessment it had earlier enjoyed in selective strands of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century philosophy".

connection Deleuze establishes between the countless habits (which we are) and the respective selves that contemplate and contract them, habit reveals itself as, ultimately, the only possible guarantor of the continuity of the self.

However, returning to our path, it must be noted that the deleuzian text indeed lacks a detailed reflection on automatism. The issue emerges explicitly only in relation to the psychoanalytic notion of 'compulsion to repeat', which "conform to the model of a material, bare and brute repetition, understood as the repetition of the same" (Deleuze 1995, 103). However, through the distinction between spiritual and material repetition, it seems possible to think of detaching the very idea of repetition from the automatism of compulsion to repeat. While material, or bare, repetition applies to successive, independent moments or elements, erasing the difference, spiritual repetition, or clothed repetition, repeats "the Whole on diverse coexisting levels" (Deleuze 1995, 84), thus proving itself capable of preserving difference within itself.

Despite undertaking a significant theoretical reevaluation of the concept of habit – at least in the early phase of his thought – Deleuze remains aligned with the tradition that precedes him in considering automatism as a degraded form of repetition.[12] Bare repetition, in fact, is nothing other than the outermost shell of dressed repetition, just as, according to O'Keefe's effective image,

> sundry habits coalesce and ultimately wreathe outwards, from the kernel to the shell, to the outside, where a crust forms – sterile routine, stale automatism. (O'Keefe 2016, 82)

The same holds true for Merleau-Ponty, who, focused on reassessing the role of habit, reiterates its distinction from automatism. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he conceives habit as a form of renewal of the bodily schema, that is, as "our power of dilating our being-in-the-world or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 166). Habit, in fact, "is neither a form of knowledge nor an automatism" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 166),[13] but rather a mode of the fundamental power the body exercises to make itself a world, to have a world that can be both biological (physiological, as it would have been termed in the nineteenth century) and cultural.

The case of Ricoeur is different, though his argument appears, at least seemingly, burdened by a certain ambiguity. Indeed, while he seeks to free habit from the mechanistic quality attributed to it by

12 This is true in this context, but elsewhere Deleuze uses and further develops the notion of automatism. For example, in relation to the cinematic image (cf. Deleuze 1998).

13 Partially modified translation.

associationism and reflexology, acknowledges, and indeed emphasizes, the danger of "a Fall into Automatism" (Ricoeur 1966, 296),[14] a fall from the voluntary into the involuntary, from the conscious into the unconscious. However, when automatism affects the structure and not the release of habit, Ricoeur is, almost against his will, compelled to admit a fact that might seem paradoxical: "We could even say up to a point that an act is that much more available to willing as it is more automatic in this sense" (Ricoeur 1966, 302). He goes on to state:

> Genuine automatisms, whether motor, intellectual, or moral, are the automatisms I observe. They are even a type of perfection of submissive spontaneity. They function only with the tacit authorization and latent control of consciousness which most frequently has already acted to suppress their foibles. (Ricoeur 1966, 302)

Through the idea of these "observed automatism",[15] Ricoeur (1966, 327-8), who specifically cites Ravaisson in these pages, comes to conceive of the identity of nature between the effort typical of forceful willing and the passivity of faint willing, characteristic of automatic action. In this way, he not only outlines a harmonious continuity between willing and being able (habit) but even acknowledges "the transitive action of willing in the world "through" ability" (Ricoeur 1966, 331). Automatism, as the "effect of habit" (Ricoeur 1966, 327), thus becomes the way in which will acts in the world, in the form of the body.

Our examination of this second path culminates in a text that spans the domains of literature, philosophy, and psychoanalysis: a little-known essay by Félix Guattari on the problem of the refrain in Proust's In Search of Lost Time.[16] In this work, we encounter a proposal for a radically redefined view of the relationship traditionally established between automatism and habit. In his interpretation of Proust's theory of habit, Guattari takes a further step and, making a surprising distinction between habit and automatism, completely overturns the terms in which the issue is usually framed. By analyzing the role that the *petite phrase* from *Vinteuil's Sonata* plays in the twin loves of Swann for Odette and of the protagonist for Albertine, Guattari demonstrates how, in the final part of the novel, the melody

14 Cf. Romano 2011.

15 Ricoeur takes the expression from Blondel (1939, 387-95). The idea of a permissive will instead seems to be taken from Lemoine (1875, 56).

16 In his masterpiece, Proust – fully aware of the preceding philosophical tradition – outlined a theory of habit that diverges from it in many respects, acknowledging, for instance, the indispensable role that a certain 'automatic' unawareness plays in the construction of experience – both daily and artistic. On this cf. Sandreschi de Robertis (2024, 113-4).

becomes silent, almost a form of "mental automatism" (Guattari 1979, 338) for the protagonist. He internalizes it, and it thus transforms into a specific form of his way of feeling and thinking. Thanks to the assimilation of the back-and-forth typical of melody construction, the protagonist finally understands the meaning of the coming into being and fading away of things in existence. In Guattari's perspective, therefore, automatism, instead of representing the rigidified form of habit, represents its most evolved expression, as a mode of thought capable of implementing a beneficently transformative power.

4 Conclusions

Starting from the double law of habit – whose dissemination in nineteenth-century France was of considerable significance – two distinct conceptions of habit have emerged, each marked by a different relation to the notion of automatism. The first understands automatism, in the sense of mechanical and unconscious repetition, as a risk inherent to the very practice of habit – habit itself being primarily structured as a form of repetition.

The second, by contrast, which emerges within historically and theoretically diverse contexts, emphasizes the relational dimension of habit. From this perspective, habit constitutes a plastic mode of engagement with the world. Accordingly, the relationship with automatism is reconfigured, and the meaning of the term itself may acquire a different inflection.

This second path brings together several significant theoretical approaches in which habit is released from the mechanistic stigma. It thereby articulates, transversally, a broader and more nuanced conception of habit – one capable of addressing the challenges that philosophy, and the philosophies of habit, currently face in their ongoing confrontation with a complex and ever-evolving constellation of medical, psychological, and neuroscientific discourses.

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