JoLMA

The Journal for the Philosophy of Language, Mind and the Arts

e-ISSN 2723-9640

Vol. 6 – Num. 2 December 2025

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA

The Journal for the Philosophy of Language, Mind and the Arts

Editor-in-Chief
Luigi Perissinotto

Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Venice University Press
Fondazione Università Ca' Foscari
Dorsoduro 3246, 30123 Venezia
URL https://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/en/edizioni/riviste/the-journal-for-the-philosophy-of-language-mind-an/

JoLMA
The Journal for the Philosophy of Language, Mind and the Arts

Six-monthly Journal

Head office Università Ca' Foscari Venezia | Dipartimento di Filosofia e Beni Culturali | Palazzo Malcanton Marcorà | Dorsoduro 3484/D - 30123 Venezia | Italia | jolma_editor@unive.it

Publisher Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing | Fondazione Università Ca' Foscari | Dorsoduro 3246, 30123 Venezia, Italia | ecf@unive.it

Certificazione scientifica delle Opere pubblicate da Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing: tutti i saggi pubblicati hanno ottenuto il parere favorevole da parte di valutatori esperti della materia, attraverso un processo di revisione anonima sotto la responsabilità del Comitato scientifico della rivista. La valutazione è stata condotta in aderenza ai criteri scientifici ed editoriali di Edizioni Ca' Foscari.
Scientific certification of the works published by Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing: all essays published in this volume have received a favourable opinion by subject-matter experts, through an anonymous peer review process under the responsibility of the Advisory Board of the journal. The evaluations were conducted in adherence to the scientific and editorial criteria established by Edizioni Ca' Foscari.

JoLMA
Vol. 6 – Num. 2 –December 2025
e-ISSN 2723-9640

Table of Contents

URL https://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/en/edizioni/riviste/the-journal-for-the-philosophy-of-language-mind-an/2025/2/
DOI http://doi.org/10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2025/02

Habits Between Sensibility and Action
Rethinking the Double Law of Habit

edited by Roberta Dreon and Marco Piazza

e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA
Vol. 6 — Num. 2 — December 2025

Preface

Roberta Dreon
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy

Marco Piazza
Università Roma Tre, Italy

The current issue of *The Journal for the Philosophy of Mind, Language and the Arts* emerges from a collaborative research context on the philosophy of habits. It is part of a wider project supported by the Italian Ministry of University, entitled *Habits (in Time) of Crisis. Conceptual Tools for Dealing with Disruptive Events* (PRIN 2022), and is situated among the numerous scholarly activities carried out by the Interuniversity Centre for Habit Studies, known as PhilHabits.[1] It is within this context that the idea of revisiting the so-called double law of habits first emerged. Let us now turn to the project's background and briefly discuss this concept.

The idea of reconsidering this subject originally arose from a conversation between the authors of this preface and the editors of the current issue. The comparison of different viewpoints and theoretical frameworks revealed that such an exchange can generate crises – large or small – in our habitual ways of thinking, and that these crises can be potentially productive. One of us was attempting to use Dewey's notion of intelligent habit as a conceptual tool for interpreting artistic practices and sought the other's assistance, given his expertise in the history of the concept of habit in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

1 See: https://philhabits.org/en/home/.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Open access

Citation Dreon, Roberta; Piazza, Marco (2025). "Preface". *JoLMA*, 6(2), -12.

DOI 10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2025/02/000

Our dialogue centered on the relationship between habits and intelligence as sensitivity to environmental cues, stemming from John Dewey's distinction between routine habits and intelligent habits, as presented in *Human Nature and Conduct* (Dewey 1988). In a nutshell, it is the law

> according to which habit, through repetition or practice, weakens passive sensations, to which we gradually become accustomed, while strengthening our active judgements, but at the same time removes our reactions, whether motor or mental, from the sphere of attention, making them spontaneous or automatic and therefore easier and less tiring, and thus transforming them into inclinations or tendencies (Piazza 2019, 63)

that are, moreover, reversible, i.e. subject to the intervention of control. In other words, the double law of habit asserts that the continuous repetition of an action over time produces a twofold effect: on one hand, it improves the fluidity and ease of action; on the other, it weakens the impression of the stimulus eliciting the habitual response. If we assume Dewey's concept of intelligent habits is correct, however, the double law of habits appears not to fit such habits, insofar as "intelligent or artistic habits seem to combine fluid movements with a stronger awareness of the features of the material, the audience, and the complex situation with which they are interacting" (Dreon 2024, 145). In the case of flexible, intelligent habits, it seems that they involve an increased sensitivity to the environment rather than a decrease in perceptual subtlety. This is not a form of generalized enhancement of sensitivity, such as the one produced by certain drugs, but a "special sensitiveness or accessibility of a certain class of stimuli, standing predilections and aversions" (Dewey 1988, 32) – a kind of selectively oriented augmented attention and interest, channelled through habits.

A second issue emerging in subsequent meetings and workshops involving our larger research groups was that the so-called double law apparently assumes the standard picture of habits as deriving from the mechanical repetition of stimulus-response connections. It also relies on the idea that perception and action are primarily independent phases of conduct, originally linked through an intelligent, voluntary act and then connected through mechanical habitualization. This view is problematic in current debates and has been questioned by different philosophical approaches throughout the twentieth century, as well as more recently. Within Classical Pragmatism, the key reference is John Dewey's 1896 essay *The Reflex-Arc Concept in Psychology*, where he argues that the familiar stimulus-response sequence is not a scientific account of behaviour, but rather stems from a dualistic philosophical framework. By splitting experience

into distinct passive and active components, this outlook creates a "disarticulated psychology". The resulting theoretical framework must artificially link a purely perceptual external stimulus with a motor response originating within the subject, relying on a mental coordination (Dewey 1972). Within the phenomenological tradition, Maurice Merleau-Ponty famously challenged the allegedly linear pattern of behavior in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, arguing that perception is primarily guided by the possibility of grasping (*zeigen*) (Merleau-Ponty 2002) and involves movement as an intrinsic feature ("*Wahrnehmen ist sich Bewegen*" [Perceiving is moving], cf. Merleau-Ponty 2003). More recently, post-cognitivist trends in the philosophy of mind – particularly Enactivism and so-called Ecological Theory – have strongly criticized the representational view of perception and defended the claim that perception involves full-fledged, dynamic embodiment and goal-oriented action (cf. Gibson 1979; Noë 2004; Gallagher 2017).

Consequently, we concluded that a historical and fine-grained conceptual analysis of the double law was needed and could prove useful even in current debates. As readers will hopefully appreciate, the papers collected in this issue of the journal display an interesting variety of vocabularies, reflecting the different formulations of the so-called double law of habit (including, at times, "law of habit", "law of habits", or even "triple law") as well as the diversity of authors examined. Key conceptual terms reappear with different functions and nuances: perception, impression, and action, passive and active habits, intelligence, sensitivity, training, and so on. The result is a complex picture that cannot easily be reduced to uniform classifications. It does not offer single, definitive answers to our initial questions, but rather helps us to reconsider them beyond easy simplifications.

This investigation begins with an examination of the first and fundamental building blocks of the double law of habit, which can be traced back to Aristotle. His philosophy of habit and repetition is the focus of two articles in this issue. Addressing the relationship between habit, choice, and action within Aristotelian moral reflection, Francesca Masi compares the various interpretations proposed to date regarding the complex relationship between habituation (*ethos*) and habit (*hexis*), the latter understood as a disposition permanently acquired through training or exercise. The result is a well-balanced interpretation that steers clear of any form of determinism, while preserving the character of Aristotelian virtue as a habitual practice. Giulia Mingucci reaches similar conclusions in her analysis of the role played by the reiteration of perceptual traces (*phantasmata*) in guiding our epistemic and practical engagement with reality. Human behaviour, she argues, is not guided solely by *phantasia*, as is the case with other more complex animals, but also by a rational control

mechanism capable of disapproving what is proposed by the re-presentation of perceptual traces, even when these are accompanied by pleasure.

Moving into the century that saw the first codification of the double law of habit by Joseph Butler (1736), Catherine Dromelet presents a triadic version of the law, which she reconstructs in the thought of David Hartley, particularly in his *Observations on Man* (1749). As feelings weaken and the capacity for action increases, there emerges a redirection of intention which – although used by Hartley in a super-empirical and mystical framework – is presented by Dromelet as a potentially valuable response to the challenges posed by contemporary social fragmentation. In his contribution, which brings us into the nineteenth century, Marco Piazza reconstructs in full the rich formulation of the double law of habit contained in Maine de Biran's *Mémoires sur l'influence de l'habitude* (1801-1802), demonstrating that it includes all the elements found in what has traditionally been considered the most complete formulation of the double law, namely that of Ravaisson (1838). In this work, Maine de Biran identifies three types of habits: to those of sensitivity and judgment – typical of the standard formulation of the double law – he adds habits of imagination, which, however, constitute an exception to the double law itself, thereby yielding a more flexible theory than that of Ravaisson. Alice Morelli identifies in William James' philosophy of habit a further step toward redefining the double law of habit, in light of the increasingly complex and articulated conceptual developments spanning the period from Butler to Ravaisson. The "laws of habit", to use James' own expression, reproduce a dialectic only partially analogous to that of the classical double law, since the effect of habit is not a weakening of sensation or a disappearance of conscious attention. Rather, it involves a difference in degrees associated with an increase in the plasticity of neural pathways – an idea that resonates with contemporary approaches in 4E Cognition.

Elena Valeri focuses on the relationship between practices, learning, and training in Wittgenstein. Starting from the idea found in the *Philosophical Investigations* that every human activity corresponds to a custom learned through training, Valeri offers several clarifications. On the one hand, she highlights the limitations of training, whose outcomes are always variable because they are shaped by both our individual and our species-specific nature. On the other hand, she shows that training involves not only obedience to a rule but also a kind of "feeling for the rules" which consists in knowing when a rule must be modified or even abandoned.

Starting from the notion of spontaneity implicit in the double law of habit, Sofia Sandreschi de Robertis highlights two different conceptions of habit that emerge in French philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century. In the first, habit is understood essentially

as a form of repetition that inevitably tends toward a mechanical and passive configuration. In the second, by contrast, emphasis is placed on the relational dimension of habit, thereby freeing it from the stigma of mechanistic automatism. Habit thus becomes a concept with broader contours, capable of addressing the concerns of more recent reflections on the topic.

An excerpt from *The Principles of Moral Philosophy* by George Turnbull, published in 1740, concludes the issue. This text seemed particularly appropriate to accompany the monographic dossier on the double law of habit, as it contains the earliest known occurrence of the expression *Law of Habits*.

Bibliography

Dewey, J. (1972). "The Reflex-Arc Concept in Psychology". *The Early Works*, Vol. 5. Carbondale; Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 96-110.

Dewey, J. (1988). *Human Nature and Conduct*. Vol. 14, *The Middle Works*. Carbondale; Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dreon, R. (2024). "The Arts are Made of (Intelligent) Habits". *Aisthesis*, 17(1), 135-53. http://doi.org/10.7413/2035-8466010.

Gallagher, S. (2017). *Enactivist Interventions*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Gibson, J.J. (1979). *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Houghton: Mifflin and Company.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2003). *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Nöe, A. (2004). *Action in Perception*. Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press.

Piazza, M. (2019). "Fasci ambulanti di abitudini". James, W., *Le leggi dell'abitudine*. A cura di D. Vincenti. Milan: Mimesis, 61-7.

e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA
Vol. 6 — Num. 2 — December 2025

A Note on George Turnbull and the Law of Habits

Sofia Sandreschi de Robertis
Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Italy

George Turnbull, remembered today primarily for the influence he exerted on Thomas Reid, is a relatively obscure figure of the Scottish Enlightenment whose thought, however, is in many respects original and worthy of close consideration.[1] Born in 1698, he studied at the University of Edinburgh between 1711 and 1721, the year in which he became Regent at Marischal College, Aberdeen. There he met Reid, who would be his student from 1723 to 1726. Beginning the following year, Turnbull spent the next fifteen years travelling throughout Europe, working as a private tutor, mainly in France, Germany, and Italy.[2]

Turnbull was the first to advocate the usefulness of the Newtonian scientific method for the construction of philosophy, as is evident from the very title of his 1723 graduation thesis: *De scientiae naturalis cum philosophia morali conjunctione*. A deeply religious man – he was ordained into the Church of England in 1739 – his philosophical interests were closely intertwined with moral and theological questions. Indeed, his most important work, published

1 With the exception of the works of John P. Wright (1994; 2011) and John P. Wright and Kathryn Tabb (2023).

2 For more detailed biographical information, see Wood 2004.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Citation Sandreschi de Robertis, Sofia (2025). "George Turnbull and the Law of Habits". *JoLMA*, 6(2), 13-16.

DOI 10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2025/02/001

in two volumes in 1740, deals precisely with The Principles of Moral and Christian Philosophy.[3]

The text presented here is an excerpt from the first volume, entitled *The Principles of Moral Philosophy*. In addressing the problem of habit, Turnbull is the first to employ the expression Law of habits. Specifically, he writes: "a propension to do, and a facility and readiness in doing, acquired by repeated exercise called the *Law of habits*" (*infra* <99>). The fact that this is "called" the *Law of habits* might lead us to think that Turnbull is referring to something else – perhaps to a source from which he derived this particular expression. However, as far as current knowledge allows us to determine, he appears to be the first among his contemporaries – both in the English and French contexts – to make use of it. We might therefore hypothesize that he drew upon a more distant source, possibly of Greek or Latin origin, or perhaps – more simply – that the phrase constitutes a rhetorical device intended to lend greater authority to his argument, which aims to highlight the effects of the *Law of habits*. The first consequence, perhaps the most important, consists in the development of memory and habitual knowledge. Habit emerges immediately in all its power as a principle of the perfection of all our faculties: "Attention, judging, reasoning, writing, speaking, composing, in one word, all our powers and actions in their perfection are so many respective habits".

After emphasizing how habit – or the association of ideas – has the power to render agreeable what was previously disagreeable, Turnbull goes on to formulate what would only a century later come to be known as the "double law of habit".[4] He observes, in fact, that:

> As practical habits are formed and strengthned by repeated acts; so passive impressions are found to grow weaker by being repeated on us. Whence it must follow, that active habits may be gradually forming and strengthning by a course of acting upon such and such motives; while excitements themselves are proportionably by degrees becoming less sensible, that is, are continually less and less felt, as the active habits strengthen (*infra* <103>).

He thus establishes the inversely proportional power of habit to strengthen our ways of acting – the so-called "active habits" – through

3 On the problem of the relationship between the two volumes, see the introduction by Alexander Broadie to G. Turnbull (2005, xi-xii).

4 A few years earlier, Butler (1736) had already outlined the content of the double law, although without employing this expression. However, it would not be until the nineteenth century, with the contribution of Maine de Biran [1802] (1987) and later of Ravaisson [1838] (2008), that the double law would receive its explicit and complete formulation.

a weakening of impressions, which are instead passive. Precisely because they escape perception, active habits become part of our character and acquire the capacity to influence our actions with even greater force. Not only do certain habits become part of our temperament, but the temperament itself is formed as a direct consequence of the *Law of habits*, since, although character finds its root in nature, it is only through the repetition of certain acts that it assumes its complete and definitive form. In this regard, Turnbull, rather than emphasizing the rigidity of traits acquired through habit – as many authors before and after him do – prefers to highlight their transformative capacity. Indeed, it is precisely thanks to the *Law of Habits* that each of us can modify undesirable aspects of our temperament and become what we wish to be.

Broadly speaking, according to Turnbull, there are two kinds of temperament: the deliberative, which consists in "the habitual power of enquiring and judging before we choose or act", and its opposite, which coincides with "the habit of acting precipitately, and in blind, slavish obedience to every fancy or appetite that assails us" (*infra* <105>). Habit, therefore, is a neutral factor that we can choose to exercise either in the direction of a "*vile slavery and impotence*" or toward a "*command* over ourselves", which represents nothing other than the very possibility of our liberty.

Bibliography

Butler, J. (1736). *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature, to which are added Two brief Dissertations: I. Of Personal Identity, II. Of the Nature of Virtue*. London: J., J. & P. Knapton.

Maine de Biran [1802] (1987). *Mémoires sur l'Influence de l'habitude* [1801-1802]. Ed. by G. Romeyer-Dherbey. Maine de Biran, *Oeuvres*. Vol. 2. Ed. by F. Azouvi. Paris: Vrin.

Ravaisson, F. [1838] (2008). *Of Habit*. En. transl. by C. Carlisle and M. Sinclair. London: Continuum. Transl. of *De l'habitude*. Paris: H. Fournier & C., 1838.

Turnbull, G. (2005). *The Principles of Moral and Christian Philosophy*. Vol. 1, *The Principles of Moral Philosophy*. Ed. and with an Introduction by A. Broadie. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Wood, P. (2004). "George Turnbull (1698–1748)". *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wright, J.P. (1994). "Butler and Hume on Habit and Moral Character". Stewart, M.A.; Wright, J.P. (eds), *Hume and Hume's Connexions*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 105-18.

Wright, J.P. (2011). "Ideas of Habit and Custom in Early Modern Philosophy". *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 41(1), 18-32.

Wright, J.P.; Tabb, K. (2023). "Habit and the Association of Ideas in the Scottish Enlightenment". Garrett, A.; Harris, J.A. (eds), *Scottish Philosophy in the Eighteenth Century. Volume II: Method, Metaphysics, Mind, Language*. Oxford: Oxford Academic, 293-326.

e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA
Vol. 6 — Num. 2 — December 2025

The Law of Habits
An Excerpt from *The Principles of Moral and Christian Philosophy*

George Turnbull

George Turnbull, *The Principles of Moral and Christian Philosophy*. Volume 1. *The Principles of Moral Philosophy*. ed. and with an Introduction by A. Broadie, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005, Part I, Chapter III, pp. 133-41. In the text, the pages of the original edition (G. Turnbull, *The Principles of Moral Philosophy*, London: John Noon, 1740) are indicated in square brackets. In the footnotes, the editor's additions are indicated in square brackets.

I now proceed to consider some effects, which though habits and association of ideas are really one and the same thing, and really resolve into one principle; yet are in common language called active habits. For by that name are all associations of ideas called, which terminate in what is termed action either of the mind or of the body. Now provided, on this head, we make mention of the most remarkable phenomena belonging to it, it is but of <99> little consequence in what order effects so nearly related to one another are proposed.

I. It is in consequence of a propension to do, and a facility and readiness in doing, acquired by repeated exercise called the *Law of habits,* that we have memory and habitual knowledge, learn languages with tolerable ease, attain to grace of body, as in dancing; to a good ear in music, a good eye in painting or architecture, and a good taste of any ingenious composition, as in oratory or poetry. For what else is memory, but the power of recalling with facility and quickness ideas and truths we had formerly discovered or perceived? and how is it strengthened or improved but by exercise? Without memory there can

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Citation Turnbull, George (2025). "The Law of Habits. An Excerpt from *The Principles of Moral and Christian Philosophy*". *JoLMA*, 6(2), 17-24.

DOI 10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2025/02/002

be no invention, judgment, nor wit, because without memory ideas cannot be readily and quickly laid together, in order to be compared, that their agreements and resemblances, or disagreements and differences, may be discerned. And what is taste, but the power of judging truly with quickness acquired by frequent consideration and practice: that is, confirmed into habit by repeated acts? In fine, it is in consequence of this law, or formation of our mind, that the reiterated exercises of any of our faculties are not lost labour, but produce perfection. Attention, judging, reasoning, writing, speaking, composing, in one word, all our powers and actions in their perfection are so many respective habits: and therefore, to ask why the mind is so framed, is to ask, why perfection of any kind is attainable by us, or within our power. Instruction and education presuppose this frame of mind in the rules laid down with regard to them: and the effect of education, or early accustomance is well expressed by the common proverb, which calls it, *A second nature.* To exemplify this observation, and at the same time to shew what true *logic* ought to be, and really was among the <100> ancients, I shall just mention two observations of *Cicero*,[1] with regard to the improvement of memory by due exercise. 1. The way, says he, to be able to retain ideas and judgments, so as to have the use of them always at our command, is to accustom ourselves to attend to things with great closeness and stedfastness; and to ask ourselves before we quit the consideration of any object, whether it is not worth while to store it up in the mind. And if it be, we ought (says he) as it were, formally to charge our memory with the custody of it, for certain particular reasons and uses, to be at the same time laid up in the mind with it. Did we take this method, we should have but little reason to complain of the slipperiness and treachery of memory. But we, it seems, expect it should be strong and perfect, without our taking pains to improve it: that is, we expect a habit to be formed, otherwise than by repeated exercise. 2. What would be of great help to memory, according to the same author, is, not letting any object of

1 *Cicero de inventione rhetorica. De oratore, &c.* There is a fine passage to the same purpose, in the *Dissertationes incerti cujusdam pythagorei dorico sermone conscriptae.* Published in a collection of *Greek* tracts, by Mr. *Gale. Dissertation* 5. An virtus & sapientia doceri possent. Sed optimum fuit, & in vitae commoda pulcherrimum inventum memoriae artificium, ad omnia utile. — Hoc autem in eo consistit, primo si animum admodum advertas. — Secundo si mediteris quaecunque audieris. — Tertio si rerum quas audis, imagines reponere noveris, &c. [There is a discussion of exercises for improving memory in Cicero, *De oratore,* II.350–67. Cicero, *De oratore, Books I and II,* trans. E.W. Sutton, completed by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1942). *Dissertationes incerti cuiusdam pythagorei dorico sermone conscriptae:* "Can virtue and wisdom be taught? But the best thing was the art of memory, a very fine device that contributed to the conveniences of life and was useful for everything. The art consists in this, first you concentrate hard, secondly you think about what you've heard, and thirdly you try to form images of what you have been hearing about." In Gale, ed., *Opuscula mythologica, physica et ethica. Graece et Latine…* (Amsterdam, 1688), 731.]

importance pass, till we have considered its analogies, relations, and oppositions, with respect to several other objects or truths already of our acquaintance. For by so doing, there necessarily would be, in consequence of the law of habits and association of ideas, various securities for our being able to recal it, in proportion to the variety of analogies, relations, agreements, differences and oppositions to other objects we had observed in it. Technical rules for assist-<101>ing and improving memory, are founded upon the same principle, *viz.* the law of habits. But there is this manifest difference between them, and those rules of *Cicero:* That while, in order to help memory, we are imployed in considering many real analogies and oppositions, we really are at the same time increasing our stock of useful knowledge, and improving our inventive faculty. For does not a great part of science consist in the knowledge of analogies and oppositions among objects? What else is knowledge? And wherein does the perfection of the inventive faculty consist, but in being able to assemble ideas together into proper order, with great facility and quickness, in order to discover hitherto unobserved relations of ideas, by seeing them in new positions?

II. It is in consequence of the law of habits, that imitation passes into custom, and that example has such powerful influence upon our temper and behaviour. Nature hath wisely made us imitative creatures, *apes,* if I may so speak. But our disposition to imitate would be of no use to us, did not repeated imitations produce habitual conformity to what we imitate. *Quintilian* gives an excellent advice with regard to imitation, when speaking of stage-actors he tells us, that among them it frequently happens, "*imitatio in mores transit.*"[2] He on this occasion sagely advises, for that reason to be extremely cautious, and to take good heed what we allow ourselves to imitate or copy after, in writing or style for instance, but above all in life and manners.

It is a very remarkable effect of the law of habits, that what is at first very uneasy and disagreeable, becomes by use, or association of ideas and habit, exceeding pleasant and agreeable. Hence it is that we come to like the train of business we have been for some time inured to, however disagreeable <102> it might have been at first. Upon this is founded the ancient sage advice to young people about the choice of a profession in life, "To chuse that which is likeliest to be most advantageous to them, provided they have abilities for it, even though they should have preconceived some prejudice against it, or aversion

2 [Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria,* I.xi.1: "Frequent imitation develops into habit." Quintilian, *The Orator's Education,* ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell, 5 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001).]

to it, because custom will make it agreeable."[3] It is owing in some measure to this law of habits, that people of the same business in life, or of the same rank and station, do so readily associate together. It is very fit it should be so on many accounts; but chiefly because people of the same profession will by conversation about their common art, which will naturally be the subject of their discourse, mutually learn from one another, and mutually excite emulation one in another. And so true is the fact, that it is become an universal proverb, *Birds of a feather flock together.*

We observed before, that a fondness after novelty is necessary in our nature,[4] to spur us to seek after new objects, and new knowledge; but that this desire of novelty is ballanced in our frame by the liking contracted to an object by habitual commerce with it, lest our itch after novelty should render us too unsteady, too desultory, and consequently too superficial and heedless in our attention to an object, to be able to attain to the full knowledge of it. Now it is in consequence of the law of habits, that this liking to an object is formed. By long or frequent conversation with an object, we become more pleased with it: the more narrowly and attentively we have considered it, the more we delight in it; for we find by frequently reasoning about the same object, that it is not new objects only that can afford us fresh entertainment; but that <103> every object is an endless fund of new discoveries: and we at the same time experience, that the more we employ ourselves about the same object, the more easy it becomes to us to make progress in new discoveries about it; and thus a fondness for the same object, or the same train of study, is contracted, so that we are not easily prevailed upon, even by quite new ones, to desert it: or if we are, yet we return to it again with such a relish, as one renews conversation with an old acquaintance he had not seen for some time.

III. But one of the most remarkable advantages of the law of habits is, *(I shall give it in the words of an excellent author),*[5] a power with regard to pleasure and pain in respect of practical habits. As practical habits are formed and strengthned by repeated acts; so passive impressions are found to grow weaker by being repeated on us. Whence it must follow, that active habits may be gradually forming and strengthning by a course of acting upon such and such motives; while excitements themselves are proportionably by degrees

3 *Plutarch de sanitate tuenda.* [The passage is in Plutarch's *De sanitate tuenda,* 123C; see also his *De tranquillitate animi,* 466F; and *De exilio,* 602B. Plutarch, *Omnia quae extant opera,* 2 vols. (Paris, 1624).]

4 In the first chapter, upon our furniture for progress in knowledge.

5 Dr. *Butler* (the Bishop of *Bristol*) upon analogy. [Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1736), I.V.ii.]

becoming less sensible, that is, are continually less and less felt, as the active habits strengthen. Experience confirms this.

For active principles at the very time they are less lively in perception than they were, are found to be somehow wrought into character and temper, and become more powerful in influencing our practice. Thus perception of danger is a natural excitement of passive fear, and active caution: and by being inured to danger, habits of the latter are gradually wrought, at the same time that the former gradually lessens. Perception of distress is a natural excitement, passively to pity, and actively to relieve it. But let a man set himself to attend to, enquire out and relieve distressed persons, and he <104> cannot but be less and less affected with the various miseries of human life, with which he must become acquainted: but yet, at the same time, benevolence considered, not as a passion, but as a practical principle of action will strengthen; and whilst he passionately compassionates the distressed less, he will acquire a greater aptitude actively to assist and befriend them. It is the same with all other affections which may be worked by exercise into active principles, and being settled and established as such in the mind, constitute a habitual character or temper that exerts itself calmly and regularly.

IV. It is indeed, in consequence of the law of habits that temper or character is formed, for tho all the affections of mankind be, and must be originally from nature; and art, or exercise, cannot create, but can only make some change to the better or worse upon what nature hath implanted in our breasts; yet habit is the nurse of all affections: it is by repeated acts that any one is wrought into temper or becomes habitual. Whatever temper we would form, we must do it not merely by enforcing upon our minds, a strong conviction of its usefulness and reasonableness; but chiefly by exerting ourselves to call forth into action the affections which constitute it; by exercising them frequently, or by various acts; and that without intermission till the point is gained; that is, till these affections are become strong, ready to go out into action on any proper occasion; and we have contracted a propension to exert them. This is the way temper or character is formed. And by this means, it is in our power to change any temper we may have contracted, and to form ourselves to any desireable one. And this leads me to observe, that the chief benefit of the law of habits, is our being able in consequence of it to acquire the *deliberative temper or habit:* that is, the habitual power of enquiring and judging before we choose or <105> act; the opposite to which is the habit of acting precipitately, and in blind, slavish obedience to every fancy or appetite that assails us. Whatever metaphysical janglings there have been about the freedom of our will; our moral dominion, liberty, and mastership of ourselves certainly consist in the established habit of thinking well before we act; insomuch as to be sure of ourselves, that no fancy or appetite shall be able to hurry us away into action, till reason

and moral conscience have pronounced an impartial sentence about them. It is this command over ourselves, this empire over our passions, which enables us to put trust or confidence in ourselves, and renders us sure and trust-worthy in society to others. In it do true wisdom and freedom lie. And as it ought to be the chief business of education to form early this deliberative habit and temper in young minds; and the constant employment of every man to preserve and maintain it in due strength; so the only way to attain to it, or uphold it, is, 1. By inculcating upon ourselves the excellence and usefulness of it, and the manifold disadvantages that redound from the want or weakness of it. And, 2. by practicing ourselves in choosing and acting after the deliberative judicious manner; in habituating ourselves to call all sorts of ideas, fancies, and motives to a strict account; or in accustoming whatever opinion or desire claims our pursuit, to give in its reasons at the bar of reason, and to wait patiently its examination and sentence. Thus alone is the right moral temper formed. And these two exercises will be the constant employment of every one, who aims at the improvement and perfection of his mind; or at acting like a rational creature, and with true inward liberty and self-dominion, which, like every other habit, can only be acquired by practice and custom. 'Tis no matter as to the present case, how the will is determined, by motives or by desires, by the last act of the judgment, or by the mind itself, that is, <106> by its own self-motive power. For whatever be the meaning of such phrases, 'tis as certain, that *command* over ourselves is *liberty,* as that being so *enthralled* by any appetite, as not to be able so much as to examine its pretensions before we yield to it; or being so *habituated* to desultoriness and thoughtlessness, and blind rash choice, as not to have it in our power to think or judge before we act, is *vile slavery and impotence.*

Thus therefore it is really in consequence of the law of habits, that we are capable of liberty, or are free agents.[6] Now, I think from what

6 So the ancients define liberty. Soli enim hi vivunt ut volunt, qui quid velle debeant didicerunt. Ineruditae autem & rationis expertes animi incitationes atque actiones exilem quandam ignobilemque voluntatis libertatem multa cum poenitentia conjunctam habent, &c. *Plutarch* de auditione libellus. So *Cicero,* paradox. 5. Quid est enim libertas? potestas vivendi ut velis. Quis igitur vivit, ut vult? nisi qui recta sequitur, qui officio gaudet, cui vivendi via considerata atque provisa est, &c. See a fine description of this moral freedom by *Persius, Satyr.* 5. Libertate opus est, &c. [Plutarch, *De auditione,* 37E: "For only those live as they wish who have learned what they ought to wish. But ignorant and irrational impulses and acts involve a rather meagre and ignoble freedom of will that is conjoined with a good deal of repenting." Cicero, *Paradoxa Stoicorum,* V.34: "For what is freedom? the power to live as you will. Who then lives as he wills except one who follows the things that are right, who delights in his duty, who has a well-considered path of life mapped out before him, etc." Cicero, *De oratore, Book III, De fato, Paradoxa Stoicorum, De partitione oratoria,* trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942). Persius, *Satires,* V.73: "What we want is true liberty, etc." *Juvenal and Persius,* trans. G.G. Ramsay, rev. ed., Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940).]

has been said of the association of ideas and of habits, we may justly conclude, "That the laws relating to them are of great use in our nature, either necessary, or fitly chosen. And consequently, that no effects which take their rise from them, are evils absolutely considered, or with regard to the whole frame and constitution of the human mind."

But there is a truth, which necessarily results from what hath been laid down, that may justly be added to this article, by way of *corolary;* and it is this, "That even in an absolutely perfect constitution of things, where the law of habit and association takes place, if knowledge be progressive, and gradually acquireable in proportion to application to improve in it, and consequently minds must be in an infant state at their entrance upon the world; some associations and habits must be early formed by minds in such a state <107> of things, which ought to be broken, and yet which cannot be broken or dissolved by reason without difficulty and struggling. For it is impossible, but some ideas, by being frequently presented to the mind conjointly must associate, which ought not to be associated; or the association of which is contrary to happiness and reason." But this observation, so plainly follows from what has been proved, that it is needless to dwell longer upon it. I shall therefore but just add, that if any one will pursue it in his own mind through all its consequences, he shall find a solution arising from it to many objections made against the present state of mankind; to those especially which are taken from the prevalence of vice in the world: for wrong opinions must produce wrong choice and action: and yet of most wrong choices, it may be said, *Decipimur specie recti*.[7]

7 [Horace, *Ars poetica,* 25. "We deceive ourselves by semblance of truth." Horace, *Satires, Epistles and Ars poetica,* trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann; New York: Putnam, 1926).]

e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA
Vol. 6 — Num. 2 — December2025

Reiteration in Sensibility According to Aristotle
Perception and *Phantasia*

Giulia Mingucci
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy

Abstract This paper explores the role of perceptual reiteration in the formation of experience according to Aristotle's psychology and epistemology. Beginning with an analysis of sense perception (*aisthesis*), it examines the retention of perceptual traces (*phantasia*) and their reiteration in experience (*empeiria*). This ultimately establishes the fundamental role of sense perception in grounding our epistemic and practical relationship to reality, revealing a novel perspective on how reiteration shapes the behaviour of both humans and non-humans.

Keywords De Anima. Aristotle's psychology. Aristotle's epistemology. Perception. Imagination.

Index 1 Introduction. – 2 *Aisthesis*. – 3 *Phantasia*. – 4 Reiteration.– 5 *Phantasia* and Reality.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-05-12
Accepted 2025-09-15
Published 2025-12-10

Check for updates

Open access

Citation Mingucci, Giulia (2025). "Reiteration in Sensibility According to Aristotle". *JoLMA*, 6(2), 25-40.

DOI 10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2025/02/003

1 Introduction

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* begins with the celebrated line: "All human beings by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses (*aistheseis*)".[1] In Aristotle's psychology and epistemology, sense perception (*aisthesis*) plays a foundational role, as the starting point of the relationship that human and non-human animals have with their environment, both on a practical level, allowing them to distinguish what favours or threatens survival, and on a cognitive level, as a basis for the elaboration of knowledge.[2]

This paper aims to highlight the role played by one of the perceptual capacities of the living being, *phantasia*,[3] understood as the ability to retain perceptual stimuli. The analysis starts with the description of the perceptual act (see § 2), from which the "fantastic" motion originates (see § 3), and then clarifies the role of the reiteration of perceptual stimuli in the formation of experience (see § 4). This will show the fundamental place that Aristotle assigns to reiteration in the structuring of the relationship of human and non-human animals with the external world (see § 5).

2 *Aisthesis*

Aristotle dedicates a large part of his scientific treatment on the soul (*psyche)* to sense perception (*aisthesis*): eleven chapters of *De Anima* are in fact dedicated to the analysis of perception from a general point of view (*katholou*) (2.5, 2.12), of its objects (*aistheta*) (2.6), of each of the five senses (2.7-11), and of the entire perceptual system, that is, the unified system consisting of the five individual senses, their interaction and integration ("common sense"),[4] and *phantasia* (3.1-3).

Aristotle describes actual perception as the exercise of a faculty of the soul, the perceptual faculty, which essentially involves bodily organs: the five sense organs and the central sense organ, the heart, which preserves the sensory stimuli obtained from peripheral sense organs. It is produced by the contact, through a medium

1 Arist. *Metaph*. 1.1.980a21-22, cf. Ross 1924 slightly modified.

2 Cf. Arist. *Metaph*. 1.1.980a22-27.

3 I leave the term *phantasia*, as well as its correlative *phantasma*, untranslated, given the difficulty of rendering its meaning in modern languages: in this regard, see, among recent studies, Caston 2021; Radovic 2021. The exegetical debate on Aristotelian *phantasia* will be briefly resumed below (see § 3).

4 I follow Gregorić 2007 in understanding "common sense" not as a separate sense that is "added to" and transcends the five individual senses, but as one of the capacities of the unified perceptual faculty.

(*metaxu*) – adherent to the body (i.e. the flesh) in the case of the senses of contact or external to the body (i.e. air and/or water) in the case of the distal senses[5] – of the perceptible object (*aistheton*) with the sensory organ (*aistheterion*).

The impact of the perceptible on the sense organ produces a *kinesis tis*,[6] a particular type of "motion" or process, known in the literature with the expression "perfective alteration": it is a particular form of alteration that brings to completion the capacity that defines the sense organ as such, that is, as a bodily part capable of perceiving.[7]

In the *De Anima*, Aristotle describes this particular *kinesis* using the analogy of the imprint in the wax:

> **T1** It is necessary to grasp, concerning the whole of perception generally, that perception is what is capable of receiving perceptible forms without the matter, as wax receives the seal of a signet ring without the iron or the gold. It acquires the golden or the metallic seal, but not insofar as it is gold or metal. In a similar way, perception is also in each case affected by what has colour or taste or sound, but not insofar as each of these is said to be something, but rather insofar as each is of a certain quality, and according to its <perceptible> form. (Arist. *de An*. 2.12.424a17-24, cf. Shields 2016 slightly modified)

In sense perception, the sense organs undergo the action of the perceptible "without the matter" (T1, 424a18-19). This expression has been a major point of contention among scholars.[8] A prominent view, defended by scholars such as Myles F. Burnyeat,[9] holds that it should be understood in a subjective sense, that is, in reference to the matter of the perceiving subject: on this reading, perception is a "spiritual change" and a "pure transition of forms", referring to a cognitive process rather than any physiological change in the perceiving subject. I hold instead the alternative, objective reading that refers to the matter of the sensible object itself. In short, through perception

5 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 2.11.423a6-17, b1-20, 26-27; 3.1.424b27-30; 13.435a11-25.

6 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 2.4.415b24; 5.416b34.

7 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 2.5.

8 For a clear and effective synthesis of the exegetical debate on the perceptual process, cf. Caston 2005.

9 Burnyeat 1995a; 1995b; 2001.

we acquire the perceptible qualities (*aistheta*)[10] of external objects, i.e. colours, sounds, smells, tastes, tangible qualities – in particular temperature (hot, cold) and texture (dry or solid, wet or fluid)[11] – and their "contrary differences", such as, for example, the different colour shades within the black-white qualitative range.[12] These five kinds of perceptible qualities are each perceived by a specific sense organ and are therefore called "exclusive perceptibles" (*ta idia*), because they are acquired, each, by a specific sense modality: colours by sight, sounds by hearing, odours by smell, flavours by taste, tangible qualities by touch.[13]

Among the perceptibles, however, Aristotle does not only include colours, smells, sounds, flavours, temperatures, and textures:

> **T2** In the case of each sense, it is necessary to speak first about perceptible objects (*ta aistheta*). Perceptible objects are spoken of in three ways: in two cases we say perceptible objects are perceived in their own right, and in one co-incidentally. Of the first two, one is exclusive to an individual sense and the other common to them all. [1] By exclusive (*idion*) I mean what cannot be perceived by another sense and about what one cannot be deceived. For example, sight is of colour, hearing is of sound, and taste is of flavour, whereas touch has a number of different objects. In any case, each sense discerns these and is not deceived that there is a <specific> colour or that there is a <specific> sound – as opposed to what or where the coloured or sounding thing is. Accordingly, these sorts of objects are said to be exclusive to each sense. [2] Common perceptibles (*koina*) include motion, rest, number, shape, and magnitude, since these sorts of objects are exclusive to no one sense but are, rather, common to them all. For in some cases movement is an object of perception for both touch and sight. [3] Something is said to be an object of perception co-incidentally (*kata symbebekos*) if, for

10 I interpret the adjective *aistheton* as referring to the specific qualities of an external object that are capable of acting on a perceiver to bring about perception. Essentially, *aistheton* is the sensible form or quality of a given *pragma* which causes perception. While this position is defended, e.g., by Johnstone 2022, Corcilius 2022 offers a different view, contending that perception is never of qualities but is always immediately and holistically of 3-D objects.

11 The terms *thermon*, *psychron*, *xeron*, and *hygron* do not have perfect equivalents in modern languages. *Xeron* and *hygron* may mean "dry" and "wet" respectively, but according to Aristotle's definition of the two terms (*GC* 2.2.329b30-31) they seem to refer more to "solid" and "fluid" respectively, although this second meaning is not always maintained either. These four qualities are considered fundamental because all the others can be reduced to them: cf. Arist. *de An*. 2.11.423b27-29; see also *GC* 2.2.329b6-330a29; *PA* 2.1.646a16-20.

12 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 2.10.422a20-31, b10-14; 11.424a2-12; 3.2.426b8-12; 7.431a24-b1.

13 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 2.6 [T2], 418a11-14.

> example, the white thing should be the son of Diares. There is co-incidental perception of him, because he coincides with the white thing, of which there is perception. For this reason, one is not affected by an object of perception insofar as it is such a thing as the son of Diares. Among things perceived in their own right, exclusive objects are properly perceptible objects; and it is to these that the essence of each sense is naturally relative. (Arist. *de An*. 2.6.418a7-25, cf. Shields 2016 slightly modified)

In addition to the *idia*, we are able to perceive the "common perceptibles" (*ta koina*) (T2, 418a10-11, 17-20): "geometric and kinetic characteristics of bodies"[14] that are "exclusive to no one sense but rather common to them all" (T2, 418a18-19). A further kind of perceptible is the so-called "co-incidental" (*kata symbebekos*) (T2, 418a9, 20-24): an individual substance, for example "the son of Diares", to which a given perceptible quality, for example the white colour (exclusive to sight), is inherent as its attribute (T2, 418a21-23); or even a perceptible exclusive to another sense, for example a flavour (exclusive to taste) perceived by sight.[15]

With respect to the reception of exclusive perceptibles, these forms of perception are *complex*, aimed at grasping not a single unrelated quality ("monomodal perception") but an integrated set of perceptual stimuli ("multimodal perception" and "intermodal perception"):[16] for example, the colour yellow as associated with a given taste (e.g. bitter) and belonging to this particular object, e.g. bile.[17] Involving some synthesis or connection of incoming perceptual stimuli – such as their comparison or association – these complex forms of perception require that these stimuli be somehow 'retained', either momentarily or durably. Aristotle attributes this function – i.e. the conservation of perceptual stimuli – to a specific capacity within the perceptual system: *phantasia*.

14 Cf. Johnstone 2022, 169.

15 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 3.1.425a22.

16 Consistent with his reading of *aistheton* as a 3-D perceptible object (cf. fn. 10, *supra*), Corcilius 2022 rejects the distinction between simple perception (of exclusive perceptibles) and complex perception (of common and co-incidental perceptibles). I, however, maintain this distinction, as I consider it a key to understanding Aristotle's introduction of *phantasia* in *De anima* III.3, as we shall see. The expressions "monomodal perception", "multimodal perception", and "intermodal perception" are here adopted from Zucca 2015, 151-97, who uses them to characterize the perception of exclusive, common, and co-incidental perceptibles, respectively.

17 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 3.1 [T9], 425b1-2.

3 *Phantasia*

In *De Anima*, *phantasia* is presented as the *trait d'union* between perceptual and rational capacities: on the one hand, in fact, it belongs to the perceptual system,[18] while on the other it is closely connected with thought.[19] It is no coincidence, therefore, that Aristotle deals with this capacity in the third chapter of the third book of the treatise: it is in fact a place of ideal hinge between the analyses of the perceptual (2.5-3.2) and intellectual (3.4-6) faculties.

The two-faced nature of *phantasia* can also be inferred from the etymological and conceptual link of the noun both with the verb *phainesthai*, understood in terms of "perceptual appearance", and with the verb *phantazesthai*, understood in terms of "mental imagery", i.e. the free and voluntary creation of mental images.[20] These two aspects can be traced back to what can be considered the essential prerogative of *phantasia*, namely the ability to produce *phantasmata*:[21]

> **T3** If *phantasia* is 'that in virtue of which we say that a *phantasma* is produced in us', and we refrain from speaking metaphorically, will it be one of these: a capacity or state in virtue of which we discriminate and get things right or wrong. (Arist. *de An*. 3.3.428a1-4, cf. Shields 2016 modified)

Contrary to common interpretations of *phantasmata* as either internal images or physiological processes, I argue they are better understood as lasting residual traces of a perceptual process.[22] According to Aristotle, in fact, the perceptual *kinesis* continues to exercise itself for some time even after the perceptible has moved away from the perceptual horizon, in the form of post-perceptual or 'fantastic' *kinesis*:

> **T4** Since it is possible when something is set in motion for something else to be moved by it, and since *phantasia* seems to be a *kinesis tis* and not to occur without perception, but rather to occur in things which are endowed with perception and to be

18 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 2.3.413b22; 3.3.427b14-16; [T4], 428b11-13, 429a1-2.

19 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 1.1.403a8-10; 3.3.427b14-16, 27-29; 7.431a16-17, b2; 8.432a8-14; 10.433a9-10.

20 In trying to provide a unitary definition of the notion of *phantasia*, scholars usually tend to privilege one or the other aspect: for *phantasia* as a "perceptual appearance", cf. e.g. Schofield 1978; Nussbaum 1978, 221-69; as "mental imagery", Lefebvre 1988; 1992; Wedin 1988, 64-94.

21 Cf. also Arist. *Insomn*. 2.460b16-18.

22 Cf. Mingucci 2025. For a recent review of the scholarly debate on *phantasmata*, see also Winzenrieth 2025.

> of those things of which perception is, and since it is possible for *kinesis* to be effected by the actuality of perception, which *kinesis* is necessarily similar (*homoia*) to the perception, this *kinesis* would be neither possible without perception nor could it belong to things which are not endowed with perception; and it is possible for what has *phantasia* both to act and be affected in many ways in accordance with it, and for it to be either true or false [...]. If, then, nothing other than *phantasia* has the features mentioned (and this is what was claimed), then *phantasia* would be a *kinesis* effected by actual perception. (Arist. *de An.* 3.3.428b10-17, b30-429a2, cf. Shields 2016 slightly modified)

Like perception, *phantasia* is also a *kinesis tis* (T4, 428b11), "effected by actual perception" (T4, 429a1-2).[23] Perceptual *kinesis* persists at first in the peripheral sense organs as a kind of 'reverberation', and then can be 'fixed' in the central sense organ, i.e. the heart:

> **T5** The affection is not only in the sense organs when they are perceiving, but even in those that have stopped [perceiving], both at a depth and on the surface. And it is manifest that whenever we may continuously perceive something; for changing the perception the affection follows, [1] e.g., from the sun into the dark; for it happens that one sees nothing on account of the motion due to the light still subsisting in the eyes. [2] Also, if we may look at a single colour for a long time, either white or green, that to which we might shift our vision appears (*phainetai*) of that sort [of colour]. [3] Also, if, having looked at the sun or some other bright thing, we may close our eyes, to those observing closely there appears (*phainetai*), in a direct line with the path of one's vision, at first, a thing of that sort in colour, then it shifts to crimson, and then to purple, until it comes to a black colour and disappears. [4] And for those changing away from the things being moved, e.g., away from the rivers, especially away from those flowing swiftly, it appears (*phainetai*) that things at rest are being moved. [5] And people become hard of hearing from great sounds, and hard of smelling from strong smells, and <similarly> in similar cases. (Arist. *Insomn*. 2.459b5-22, cf. Polansky 2024 slightly modified)

The persistence of the *kinesis* produced by a perceptible quality in the corresponding sensory organ sometimes influences (cf. T5: [2], [4]), if not even prevents (cf. T5: [1], [5]), the perception of other perceptible qualities. This post-perceptual or fantastic *kinesis* is "similar" (*homoia*, T4, 428b14; cf. also *toiouton*, T5, 459b16) to the

23 Cf. also Arist. *Insomn*. 1.459a17-18.

original perceptual one, i.e. it preserves the salient characteristics of the original perceptual stimulus by triggering analogous causal/physiological mechanisms, 'as if' it came from the external sense object originally perceived.

From the example (3) of T5 it can be inferred that the perceptual *kinesis* gradually diminishes from the sense organ until it disappears. Crimson, purple, black are the immediate effect of actual perception: temporary perceptual traces that affect the sense organ during the visual perception and remain for some time, however limited, even after the perceptible has moved away from the perceptual horizon. Aristotle gives these perceptual 'reverberations' the name of *aisthemata*.

Depending on the psychophysical condition of the subject, the *aisthemata* can also be retained "at a depth" (T5, 459b7), i.e. in the central sense organ, in the form of *phantasmata*:

> **T6** The *kinesis* arising inscribes like a sort of imprint of the *aisthema*, just as the persons impressing with seals. (Arist. *Mem.* 1.450a30-32, cf. Polansky 2024 slightly modified)

Phantasmata derive from *aisthemata*:[24] they are "like a sort of imprint" (*hoion typon tina*) of *aisthemata* (T6, 450a31).

By using the term *typos*, Aristotle intends to emphasize two fundamental aspects of a *phantasma*: first, its enduring character; second, its similarity to that from which it originates.[25] The use of the adverb "like" (*hoion*) and the indefinite *tis* with an attenuative function ("a sort of") is important: the *phantasma* is not in fact an exact copy of the *aisthema*, since certain psychophysical conditions also contribute to its formation, and in particular the physiological conditions of the blood and the heart,[26] as well as past experiences – an aspect which is particularly important for our discourse, as we will see (see § 4).

Phantasia, understood as the ability to retain perceptual traces (see T3), plays a key role both during the act of perceiving, allowing the unification of the various perceptual stimuli available to the perceiving subject, and subsequently, in their re-elaboration, conscious – through activities such as fantasizing, remembering

24 Cf. also Arist. *de An*. 3.8.432a9-10; *Insomn*. 3.461a18-19, b21-22. For an alternative account of the relationship between *aisthemata* and *phantasmata*, see, for example, Bubb 2019.

25 Cf. LSJ, *s.v.* 'typos': "VII. archetype, pattern, model, capable of exact repetition in numerous instances […]; 2. character recognizable in a number of instances, general character, type […]. VIII. general impression, vague indication […]. 2. outline, sketch, general idea". Cf. also Bonitz 1870, 779a24-46.

26 Cf. Arist. *Mem*. 1.450a32-b11; 2.453a14-b7; *Insomn*. 3.461a8-30.

and thinking[27] – or involuntary, as happens in dreams.[28] In this perspective, "perceptual appearance" and "imagination" are nothing but different expressions of *phantasia*, resulting from its involvement in the processing of perceptual stimuli.

4 Reiteration

Already at the level of the basic dynamics of *phantasmata* formation – in a nutshell: perceptual *kineseis* persist for some time in the peripheral sense organs in the form of *aisthemata* and then leave lasting traces in the central sensorium, i.e. *phantasmata* – it is possible to glimpse the role of reiteration in the genesis of experience (*empeiria*):

> **T7** From perception there comes memory (*mneme*), as we call it, and from memory (when it occurs often [*pollakis*] in connection with the same sort of thing) experience (*empeiria*); for memories which are many in number form a single experience. (Arist. *APo.* 2.19.100a3-6, cf. Barnes 1975 slightly modified)[29]

In the concluding chapter of the *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle illustrates the process of inductive generalization (*epagoge*) by referring to the *reiteration* of the imprint of the same type of perceptual stimulus – as indicated by the expression "when memory occurs 'often' (*pollakis*)" (T7, 100a4).

The lasting trace of a perceptual stimulus is here called "memory" (*mneme*, T7, 100a4), although technically it is *phantasia*. For the imprint of the *aisthema* in the central sensorium is not properly speaking a "memory" (*mnemoneuma*), but a *phantasma*, which can be subject to various cognitive operations: only when it is considered as "in relation to another", that is, in relation to the original perceptual motion that produced it, is it a memory, that is, a *phantasma* of a specific type (i.e. the mnestic type). When the *phantasma* is

27 For 'fantasizing', see Arist. *de An.* 3.3.427b17-24; for 'memorizing', *de An.* 3.3.427b19; *Insomn.* 1.458b20-24; *Top.* 8.14.163b28-30; for 'remembering', *Mem.* 1.450b20-451a2. For the involvement of *phantasmata* in thought, see: for the elaboration of concepts and stories, *Mem.* 1.449b30-450a9, 450b20-451a2; *Po.* 17.1455a22-26; for deliberation, *de An.* 3.7.431b6-8; 11.434a5-10. In contrast to fantasizing, which is described as "creating (*poiesasthai*) of something before one's eyes" (*de An.* 3.3.427b19), the other voluntary activities of *phantasia* are described as "placing (*tithenai*) before one's eyes" (*de An.* 3.3.427b19; *Mem.* 1.450a5; *Insomn.* 1.458b23; *Po.* 17.1455a23), that is, bringing them to one's attention.

28 Cf. Arist. *Insomn.* 1.459a14-22.

29 Cf. Arist. *Metaph.* 1.1.980a28-981a1.

considered as "in virtue of itself", without associating it with the past perception that originated it, we do not say that we "remember" it, but that we "we bear it in mind" (*theorein*) or that we "think" it (*noein*); it is therefore an object of theoretical observation (*theorema*) and a concept (*noema*), rather than a memory:

> **T8** Insofar as in virtue of itself, <the *phantasma* within us> is a *theorema* or a *phantasma*; insofar as in relation to another, it is as a likeness and a *mnemoneuma*. (Arist. *Mem*. 1.450b25-27, cf. Polansky 2024 slightly modified)

Therefore, it is "insofar as in virtue of themselves" that perceptual imprints are the basis of the formation of concepts. The reiteration of the same type of perceptual stimulus is in fact for Aristotle the starting point for the identification of what is common in similar cases observed, thus opening the way to the apprehension of a universal concept (*logos*).[30] Since the intelligibles are potentially present in the perceptible forms received by the senses and preserved by *phantasia*, the perceptual faculty is necessary for the understanding of reality, not only in the scientific field, but also, as we shall see (§ 5), in the practical field.[31]

If, then, a given kind of perceptible, for example a given colour, has been perceived together with another kind of a perceptible, for example together with a given flavour, we will be inclined to 'associate' them:

> **T9** The senses perceive one another's exclusive objects co-incidentally, not insofar as they are the senses they are, but insofar as they are one, whenever perception occurs of the same thing at the same time, for example of bile that it is bitter and yellow (for it most surely does not belong to another sense to say that the two are one). This is also why one is deceived when, should something be yellow, one thinks it is bile. (Arist. *de An*. 3.1.425a30-b4, cf. Shields 2016)

Our ability to perceive bitterness by sight stems from past experience.[32] This is rooted in a previous "simultaneous" (*hama*, T9, 425b1) perception by both sight and taste of the same thing, where

30 Cf. Arist. *APo.* 2.19.100a1-3.

31 Cf. in part. Arist. *de An.* 3.8.432a3-9.

32 Cf. Arist. *de An.* 3.3.425a23-24. The manuscript evidence for *anagnorizomen* (L, μ, Ha) as an alternative to the reading *hama gnorizomen* (E) is significant. (I am indebted to Justin Winzenrieth for drawing my attention to this point). This reading implies that the co-incidental perception of sweetness by sight is a process of 'recognition' based on a previous perception.

two distinct qualities, like the bitter flavour and yellow colour of bile, are perceived "insofar as they are one" (425a31). As a result of this perceptual experience, also known as "cross-modal binding",[33] when one of these two qualities, e.g. the yellow, is perceived again, the subject is led to perceptually associate it with the perceptible of the other kind, the bitter, and thus also to see the bitter and/or the bile "co-incidentally".

On a physiological level, this phenomenon occurs because of the conservation of the visual trace of the yellow "together" (*hama*) with the gustatory trace of the bitter; consequently, a subsequent visual stimulation of the yellow colour will determine the reactivation of both kinds of perceptual traces. This process illustrates that the storage and subsequent reactivation of *phantasmata* follow the order in which the perceptible features of external objects were originally perceived:[34]

> **T10** Recollections (*anamnesis*) happen when naturally (*pephyken*) this *kinesis* arises after this; if from necessity (*ex anankes*), it is clear whenever that *kinesis* would be moved, this *kinesis* will be moved; yet if not from necessity but by habit (*ethei*), as for the most part (*hos epi to polu*) it will be moved. (Arist. *Mem*. 2.451b10-14, cf. Polansky 2024 slightly modified)

The order in which the perceptual traces are preserved is especially relevant in the case of recollection (*anamnesis*). While the exercise of memory (*mneme*), i.e. remembering (*mnemoneuein*), consists in having a memory immediately available – that is, a *phantasma* in relation to the past experience that produced it (see T8) –, the exercise of *anamnesis*, i.e. recalling (*anamimneskesthai*), consists in the intentional search for the cause of a *phantasma* which presents itself as disconnected from the original stimulus that produced it. Recalling then consists in tracing back the series of perceptual traces preserved in the central sensorium until the specific trace being sought is found.[35]

Research is facilitated when the sequence of perceptual traces is "naturally" ordered (cf. *pephyken*, T10, 451b10). While Aristotle suggests that the "natural" order of perceptual traces can be either from necessity (*ex anankes*, T10, 451b12) or by habit for the most part (*ethei, hos epi to polu*, T10, 451b13), the precise meaning of this distinction is not yet clear.[36] I propose that the two orders correspond

33 Gregorić 2007, 139.

34 On this point, see also T11, 452a29-30.

35 Cf. Arist. *de An*.1.4.408b16-17; *Mem*. 2.451b10-452b7.

36 See also the discussion by Polansky 2024, 333-8 *ad Mem*. 451b10-16.

to two distinct types of perceptual association. The necessary order is governed by logical connections, as in demonstrations,[37] while the "for the most part" order is based on empirical observations of similar cases. The key insight of this reading is that the latter order is established through the reiteration of the same patterns of perceptual stimuli sequencing and therefore "by habit", which accounts for its "for the most part" regularity:

> **T11** And so, if one is moved along an old track, one is moved upon the more customary; for habit (*to ethos*) is already just as nature (*physis*). Hence, what we oftentimes (*pollakis*) conceive, we quickly recollect; for just as in nature this is after this, thus also in [cognitive] activity; and the reiteration creates nature (*to de pollakis physin poei*). (Arist. *Mem*. 2.452a26-30, cf. Polansky 2024 slightly modified)

The result of reiteration is *ethos*, a disposition that becomes so deeply ingrained that it effectively becomes nature – indeed, a "second nature", to use a now proverbial phrase based on the *Nichomachean Ethics*.[38] In this specific context, the statement intends to highlight the profound incidence of reiteration in the cognitive process of *anamnesis*: we are able to recall memory more quickly or easily when we move "along an old track", which for this reason is more habitual to us.

But habitual experience is not science. Scientific knowledge (*episteme*) is about necessary truths: to know scientifically a given object of inquiry is to understand "the explanation because of which the object holds, that it is its explanation, and also that it is not possible for it to be otherwise",[39] where "not possible to be otherwise" expresses the primary or fundamental meaning of "necessary" (*anankaion*).[40] This type of necessity, "absolute" or "unconditional" (*haplos*), governs both the form and the contents of the *episteme*.[41] Rather, our experience of our surroundings, natural reality and human affairs, concerns phenomena that can be otherwise or even not be; their mode of occurrence, limited to "for the most part" regularity,[42] paves the way to exception:

37 Cf. Arist. *Mem*. 2.452a2-3, 17.

38 Cf. Arist. *EN* 2.1.1103a14-26.

39 Arist. *APo*. 1.2.71b9-12, cf. Barnes 1975.

40 Cf. Arist. *Metaph*. 4.5.1015a33-36.

41 Cf. Arist. *APo*. 1.4.73a21-24; 6.74b5-21; 8.75b22-24; *Metaph*. 4.5.1015b6-9; *EN* 6.3.1139b19-25.

42 Cf. Arist. *APr.* 1.3.25b14-15; *PA* 3.2.663b27-29; *GA* 1.18.725b16-19; 19.727b29-30; *EN* 1.1.1094b19-22; 3.5.1112b7-8.

> **T12** And since just as in the things by nature occurrences arise contrary to nature, and from chance, still more in the things through habit, in which nature surely does not similarly belong; so that one is moved sometimes indeed there and otherwise, and otherwise when it in some way also draws from there to itself; on account of this indeed whenever we ought to remember a name, if we know one somewhat like it, we blunder on to that. (Arist. *Mem*. 2.452a30-b6, cf. Polansky 2024)

If nature is "imprecise",[43] then even more so is "second nature", i.e. habit. The regularity according to which empirical phenomena manifest themselves can easily lead us to error: "This is also why one is in error when, should something be yellow, one thinks it is bile" (T9, 425b3-4), for the yellow that I have habitually perceived together with bitterness could instead occur together with sweetness, and belong, instead of bile, to honey.

5 *Phantasia* and Reality

The role that past perceptual traces (*phantasmata*) play in perception underscores the importance that Aristotle attributes to reiteration in shaping our experience of the world: the perceptual stimuli available to the perceiving subject are organized – united or connected, sometimes completed – thanks to the involvement of *phantasmata*. Our past experience, therefore, is not just an archive of perceptual traces, but an active filter that influences our relationship with reality.

Perception and *phantasia* underlie both our understanding of the world and the approach/avoidance behaviours crucial for animal survival. The simplest animals, i.e. animals that are endowed only with the so-called "contact" or "close-up" senses, i.e. touch and taste, such as sponges, discriminate objects that are useful and harmful to their self-preservation on the mere basis of tactile perception and the pleasant or painful feeling they experience.[44] They are "perceptual proto-evaluations"[45] of what, in a present situation, is good or bad for the perceiver, that is, in relation to its specific biological needs and their satisfaction.

The approach/avoidance mechanisms of the simplest animals are basic: being stationary (sexile), they survive by feeding on the solid substrate to which they are anchored, and by attracting or removing the desired or repelled object through elementary behaviours, such as

43 Cf. Arist. *GA* 4.10.778a4-9.

44 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 2.3.414b1-6; 3.11.433b31-434a3.

45 Zucca 2015, 356.

body contraction, the emanation of pleasant or unpleasant odours or tastes, the emission of toxic substances.[46] The most complex animals, instead, are able to move in their environment "by themselves": that is, they are endowed with locomotion.[47]

As a movement aimed at obtaining an object of desire (*to orekton*), locomotion requires something more than contact perception. For animals with this ability, cognitively anticipating their object of desire is essential for them to move towards it (or away from something repulsive). For this reason, animals endowed with locomotion possess, in addition to touch and taste, also the distal senses, i.e. smell, hearing and sight, through which they can "perceive at a distance" (*proaisthanesthai*), and therefore in advance, what is useful or harmful to their survival.[48]

It is no coincidence that Aristotle attributes the capacity for *phantasia* exclusively to this latter class of animals.[49] The object of desire, in fact, in order to be such, must "appear" (*phainetai*) in a certain light, that is, as something good for the animal (*to phainomenon agathon*).[50] That this object is *really* good – that it is, taking the example of T9, not bile but honey, and therefore yellow, sweet, pleasant and edible – is not relevant for the causal explanation of the animal's motor behaviour; what matters is that it 'appears' to the animal as such, thus motivating it to act in a certain way.

Now, there is a distinction between the motor behaviour of nonhuman animals, even more complex, and that of human beings. The behaviour of non-human animals is motivated by the *phantasia* of a given sense object as something to be pursued or avoided here and now, at the very moment when it presents itself as pleasant or painful.[51] In human beings, on the other hand, the action to be performed may also be determined in the deliberative process, which Aristotle describes as a calculation or reasoning (*logismos*) "about future things with reference to things which are present".[52] Human beings are therefore capable of deciding whether or not to pursue what is presented to them as a good by *phantasia*: reasoning can in fact disprove the perceptual appearance, showing, for example, that honey, although it now appears to be a good insofar as it is pleasant, actually turns out to be an evil in the long run for a person suffering from diabetes.

46 Cf. Arist. *HA* 5.16.548a28-31, b10-14; *PA* 2.4.650b27-33.

47 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 3.9.432b15-17.

48 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 2.9.421b11-13; 3.12.434b24-27; *Sens*. 1.436b18-437a1.

49 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 3.3.429a5-9; 9.432b15-17; 10.433b27-29.

50 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 3.10.433a27-30.

51 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 3.10.433b8-10.

52 Arist. *de An*. 3.7.431b7-8, cf. Shields 2016.

As responsible for the preservation and reactivation of perceptual traces, *phantasia* is also responsible for these errors: it is in fact because of our experience that something can appear to us in an erroneous way. This is precisely the reason why, according to Aristotle, error "is the more typical state in animals and the soul spends more time in this condition":[53] our cognitive states and our actions are fallible because it is *phantasia* that is fallible (T3) and, in most cases, turns out to be false.[54]

Nevertheless, Aristotle retains an epistemologically optimistic perspective. Although he admits that our understanding of reality can be partial and prone to error, and our actions sometimes deceived by false appearances, he trusts that reiteration, through learning and practice, will open the way to scientific knowledge and wisdom.

Abbreviations

The titles of Aristotle's works are quoted according to the abbreviations adopted in LSJ.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Barnes, J. (ed.) (1975). Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Polansky, R. (ed.) (2024). *Aristotle's Parva naturalia*. Berlin: de Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111243832.

Ross, W.D. (ed.) (1924). *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, vol. 1. https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198847762.book.1.

Shields, C. (ed.) (2016). Aristotle, *De Anima*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199243440.book.1.

Secondary Sources

Bonitz, H. (1870). *Index Aristotelicus*. Berolini: Reimer. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110852332.

Bubb, C. (2019). "The Physiology of *Phantasmata* in Aristotle: Between Sensation and Digestion". *Apeiron*, 52(3), 273-315. https://doi.org/10.1515/apeiron-2018-0015.

Burnyeat, M.F. (1995a). "Is an Aristotelian Philosophy of Mind Still Credible? (A Draft)". Nussbaum, M.C.; Rorty, A.O. (eds), *Essays on Aristotle's De anima*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 15-26. https://doi.org/10.1093/019823600x.003.0003.

53 Arist. *de An*. 3.3.427b1-2, cf. Shields 2016.

54 Cf. Arist. *de An*. 3.3.428a12.

Burnyeat, M.F. (1995b). "How Much Happens When Aristotle Sees Red and Hears Middle C? Remarks on *De Anima* II, 7-8". Nussbaum, M.C.; Rorty, A.O. (eds), *Essays on Aristotle's De anima*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 421-34. https://doi.org/10.1093/019823600X.001.0001.002.008.

Burnyeat, M.F. (2001). "Aquinas on 'Spiritual Change' in Perception". Perler, D. (ed.), *Ancient and Medieval Theories of Intentionality*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 129-53. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004453296_010.

Caston, V. (2005). "The Spirit and the Letter: Aristotle on Perception". Salles, R. (ed.), *Metaphysics, Soul and Ethics in Ancient Thought: Themes from the Work of Richard Sorabji*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 245-320. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199261307.003.0011.

Caston, V. (2021). "Aristotle and the Cartesian Theatre". Gregorić, P.; Fink, J.L. (eds), *Encounters with Aristotelian Philosophy of Mind*. New York: Routledge, 169-220. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003008484-11.

Corcilius, K. (2022). "The Gate to Reality: Aristotle's Basic Account of Perception". Cohoe, C.M. (ed.), *Aristotle's on the Soul: A Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 122-54. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108641517.008.

Gregorić, P. (2007). *Aristotle on the Common Sense*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199277377.001.0001.

Johnstone, M.A. (2022). "Aristotle on the Objects of Perception". Cohoe, C.M. (ed.), *Aristotle's on the Soul: A Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 155-73. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108641517.009.

Lefebvre, R. (1988). "La φαντασία chez Aristote: Subliminalite, indistinction et pathologie de la perception". *Les Etudes Philosophiques*, 2, 195-206.

Lefebvre, R. (1992). "Aristote, l'imagination et le phenomene: L'interpretation de Martha Craven Nussbaum". *Phronesis*, 37, 22-45. https://doi.org/10.1163/156852892321052641.

LSJ – Liddell, H.G.; Scott, R.; Jones, H.S. (eds) (1996). *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Mingucci, G. (2025). "Ghosts in the Machine? Il dibattito esegetico sulla concezione aristotelica dei φαντάσματα". *Elenchos*, 46(1), 97-115. https://doi.org/10.1515/elen-2025-0005.

Nussbaum, M.C. (1978). "Essay 5: The Role of *Phantasia* in Aristotle's Explanation of Action". Ead. (ed.), *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 221-69. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15r57hz.15.

Radovic, F. (2021). "*Eidōla* and *Phantasmata* in Aristotle: Two Senses of 'Image' in Aristotelian Psychology". Gregorić, P.; Fink, J.L. (eds), *Encounters with Aristotelian Philosophy of Mind*. New York: Routledge, 141-68. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003008484-10.

Schofield, M. (1978). "Aristotle on the Imagination". Lloyd, G.E.R.; Owen, G.E.L. (eds), *Aristotle on Mind and the Senses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 99-129.

Wedin, M.V. (1988). *Mind and Imagination in Aristotle*. New Haven: Yale University. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt211qw8h.

Winzenrieth, J. (2025). "About the Meaning of Φάντασμα in Aristotle". *Apeiron*, 58(2), 235-69. https://doi.org/10.1515/apeiron-2024-0038.

Zucca, D. (2015). *L'anima del vivente: Vita, cognizione e azione nella psicologia aristotelica*. Brescia: Morcelliana.

e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA
Vol. 6 — Num. 2 — December 2025

Habit and Automatism
Two Opposite Paths

Sofia Sandreschi de Robertis
Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Italy

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.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-02-12
Accepted 2025-05-06
Published 2025-06-20

Open access

Citation Sandreschi de Robertis, Sofia (2025). "Habit and Automatism". *JoLMA*, 6(2), 41-56.

DOI 10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2025/02/008

1 Introduction

Habit[1] 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.

1 This paper is the product of a research conducted as part of the PRIN 2022 project "Habits in (Time of) Crisis (HiToC). Conceptual Tools for Dealing with Disruptive Events" (CUP: F53D23007330006) funded by European Union – Next-GenerationEU – The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) – MISSION 4, SECOND INTERVENTION AREA, INVESTIMENTO 1.1 Fondo per il Programma Nazionale di Ricerca e Progetti di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale (PRIN).

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,[2] 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,[3] 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.[4] (Maine de Biran [1802] 1987, 72)

2 Wright 2011; Piazza 2018, 171-84.

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

4 All translations are by the author unless otherwise stated.

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 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,[5] 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

5 "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 'excito-motory' 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).

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 argument, including the law that governs the effects of habit.[6] 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',

6 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.

focused on noting the effects of repetition on action and,[7] 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.

> 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.[8] For instance, Léon Dumont, philosopher and physiologist,[9] 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.

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

8 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).

9 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.

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 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.[10]

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.[11] 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

10 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".

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

new perspective distances itself from any reductionist inclination and seeks to 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.[12] 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 connection Deleuze establishes between the countless habits (which

12 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".

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.[13] 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),[14] 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

13 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).

14 Partially modified translation.

it by associationism and reflexology, acknowledges, and indeed emphasizes, the danger of "a Fall into Automatism" (Ricoeur 1966, 296),[15] 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",[16] 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.[17] 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

15 Cf. Romano 2011.

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

17 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).

twin loves of Swann for Odette and of the protagonist for Albertine, Guattari demonstrates how, in the final part of the novel, the melody 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.

Bibliography

Bennett, T. (2023). *Habit's Pathways. Repetition, Power, Conduct*. Durham; London: Duke University Press.

Bergson, H. (1934). *La pensée et le mouvant*. Paris: Presse Universitaire de France.

Bernard, C. (1878-79). Leçons sur les phénomènes de la vie communs aux animaux et aux végétaux. 2 voll. Paris: J. B. Baillière et Fils.

Bichat, X. [1800] (1827). *Physiological Researches on Life and Death*. Transl. by F. Gold. Boston: J.H.A. Frost.

Blondel, C. (1939). "Les volitions". Dumas, G. (dir.). *Nouveau traité de psychologie*, VI : 3. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 317-97.

Butler, J. (1736). *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature, to which are added Two brief Dissertations: I. Of Personal Identity, II. Of the Nature of Virtue*. London: James, John and Paul Knapton.

Cabanis, P.-J.-G. (1798). *Mémoires de l'Institut National des Sciences et Arts pour l'an IV de la République*. Paris: Baudoin.

Charcot, Jean-Martin [1872-73] (2009). *Leçons sur les maladies du système nerveux faites à la Salpêtrières*. Paris: l'Harmattan.

Deleuze, G. (1995). *Difference and Repetition*. Transl. by P. Patton. New York: Columbia University Press.

Deleuze, G. (1998). *[Sur le cinéma]. L'image-pensée: année universitaire 1984-1985*. 01, Cours du 30 octobre 1984. 4 disques. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Destutt de Tracy, A.-L.-C. (1801). *Projet d'éléments d'idéologie*. Paris: Didot.

Dromelet, C. (2019). "Une science de la sensibilité. Dumont, l'habitude et le plaisir". Dumont, L., *De l'habitude et du plaisir*. Paris: Garnier, 7-24.

Dumont, L. [1876] (2019). *De l'habitude et du plaisir*. Éd. par C. Dromelet. Paris: Garnier.

Fouillée, A. (1885). "La mémoire et la reconnaissance des souvenirs". *Revue des deux mondes*, 70(1), 131-62.

Grosz, E. (2013). "Habit Today: Ravaisson, Bergson, Deleuze and Us". *Body & Society*, 19(2-3), 217-39.

Guattari, F. (1979). "Les ritournelles du temps perdu". *L'inconscient machinique. Essais de schyzo-analyse*, Paris: Éditions Recherches, 257-365.

James, W. (1880). *The Feeling of Effort*. Boston: The Society.

Janet, P. (1889). *L'automatisme psychologique. Essai de psychologie expérimentale sur les formes inférieures de l'activité humaine*. Paris: Alcan.

Lemoine, A. (1875). *L'habitude et l'instinct*. Paris: Germer Baillière.

Madinier, G. (1938). *Conscience et mouvement. Étude sur la philosophie française de Condillac à Bergson*. Paris: Alcan.

Magendie, F. (1816). Précis élémentaire de physiologie. T. I. Paris: Méquignon-Marvis.

Maine de Biran [1802] (1987). *Œuvres*. Éd. par G. Romeyer-Dherbey. T. 2, *Influence de l'habitude sur la faculté de penser*. Paris: Vrin.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *Phenomenology of perception*. Transl. by C. Smith. London; New York: Routledge.

O'Keefe, B. (2016). "Deleuze on Habit". *The Comparatist*, 40, 71-93.

Piazza, M. (2018). Creature dell'abitudine. Abito, costume, seconda natura da Aristotele alle scienze cognitive. Bologna: il Mulino.

Piazza, M. (2025). "Introduzione. Abiti e azioni individuali nella habit Renaissance". Piazza, M. (a cura di). Abiti individuali e sociali tra azione, cognizione e linguaggio. Prospettive filosofiche interdisciplinari. Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 7-19.

Piazza, M.; Vincenti, D. (2023). "The Unconscious before the Unconscious. Philosophy, Psychology and Psychiatry in Nineteenth-Century France". Iannelli, F.; Failla, M.

(eds). *Philosophy and Madness from Kant to Hegel and Beyond*. Milano: Mimesis International, 27-45.
Rabier, É. (1884). *Leçons de philosophie*. Vol. 1, *Psychologie*. Paris: Hachette.
Ravaisson, F. [1838] (2008). *Of Habit*. Ed. and transl. by C. Carlisle; M. Sinclair. London; New York: Continuum.
Ribot, T. (1883). *Les maladies de la volonté*. Paris: Alcan.
Ricoeur, P. (1966). *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*. Transl. by E.V. Kohák. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
Romano, C. (2011). "L'équivoque de l'habitude". Revue germanique internationale, 13. http://journals.openedition.org/rgi/1138.
Sandreschi de Robertis, S. (2024). *Proust e l'abitudine. Identità, memoria, inconscio*. Roma: Carocci.
Sinclair, M. (2019). *Being Inclined. Felix Ravaisson's Philosophy of Habit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Vincenti, D. (2019). *Fisiologia, patologia e alienazione mentale nel pensiero di Félix Ravaisson*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS.
Wright, J.P. (2011). "Ideas of Habit and Custom in Early Modern Philosophy". *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 42(1), 18-32.
Young, R.M. (1970). *Mind, Brain, and Adaptation in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Clarendon.

e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA
Vol. 6 — Num. 2 — December 2025

Habit, Choice, and Action
Aristotle's Analysis of Ethical Virtue

Francesca Masi
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy

Abstract In *Creature dell'abitudine. Abito, costume, seconda natura da Aristotele alle scienze cognitive*, Marco Piazza argues that, for Aristotle, habit stabilizes human action, making it regular, albeit contingent and voluntary. Drawing on his interpretation, this article examines the relationship between habit, choice, and action in Aristotle's theory, focusing on how habit forms the basis of virtue, morally shaping human nature while preserving its contingency. To this end, it examines the formation and essence of ethical virtue, analyzes the connection between virtue and choice, and elucidates the relationship between choice and contingency.

Keywords Aristotle. Habit. Deliberation. Choice. Contingency action.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-05-14
Accepted 2025-09-23
Published 2025-12-11

Open access

Citation Masi, Francesca (2025). "Habit, Choice, and Action". *JoLMA*, 6(2), 57-78.

DOI 10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2025/02/004

1 Introduction

In his insightful book *Creature dell'abitudine. Abito, costume, seconda natura da Aristotele alle scienze cognitive*, Marco Piazza shows how Aristotle's idea that habit (*ethos*) is "like a nature" has exerted a lasting influence on the history of ethical thought and continues to resonate in contemporary discussions – particularly within the framework of neo-Aristotelian ethics. A prominent example of this influence can be found in the work of John McDowell, who, in the context of a moderate naturalism,[1] conceives of habits as components of a 'second nature' that grounds ethics in the "space of reasons" and human consciousness, while remaining tied to the biological dimension of the human organism. In this regard, Piazza argues that for Aristotle it is not *hexis* (disposition) but rather the process of habituation (*ethos*) that is likened to nature, insofar as it compensates for the deficiencies of the original nature. In *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, Aristotle states that habit "comes to be like a nature",[2] emphasizing its capacity to produce a regularity that, though not necessary, stabilizes human action. In the ethical domain, this regularity is the foundation of virtue: habit brings about a stable, though not substantial, transformation of human nature, morally orienting it without negating its contingent and voluntary character.[3]

This article aims to explore precisely this aspect – namely, the relationship between habit, choice, and action in Aristotle's ethical theory. To this end, it will examine the formation and essence of ethical virtue (§ 2), analyze the connection between ethical virtue and choice (§ 3), and finally elucidate the relationship between choice and contingency (§ 4). The article therefore will show that Aristotle's theory offers a coherent reconciliation of four key dimensions of moral agency: habit, deliberation, choice, and contingency.

2 The Formation and Essence of Ethical Virtue

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*), after providing an initial definition of the ultimate good or happiness (*eudaimonia*),[4] Aristotle proceeds to examine the nature of virtue, as part of his effort to analyze all of the components implicit in this definition.[5] The inquiry into virtue occupies

1 For an overview on naturalism see Perissinotto 2019.

2 Arist. *De mem.* 2, 452 a 29-30.

3 Piazza 2018, 23.

4 Arist. *NE* I 6 1098a 15-16: "Human good turns out to be activity of the soul according to virtue".

5 Arist. *NE* I 13 1102a 5-6. Cf. Natali 2017, 63.

JoLMA
6, 2, 2025, 57-78 | e-ISSN 2723-9640

a central place in Aristotle's ethical thought and extends from Book II to Book VI. It unfolds through a series of methodical steps. Aristotle begins by distinguishing between two types of virtue: intellectual virtues, the functional excellences of the reason, which are acquired through instruction, and ethical (or moral) virtues, the functional excellences of the character, which are cultivated through habit. He states:

> Since virtue is of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue owes both its birth and its growth to teaching [...] whereas moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (*ethikē*) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word *ethos* (habit). (Aristotle, *NE* II 1, 1103a14-18)[6]

Aristotle's focus on the mode of acquisition of virtue not only situates his position within the context of the sophistic-Socratic debate later developed by Plato, but also serves a crucial methodological function for the subsequent course of the investigation. After his brief introduction of the distinction between intellectual and ethical virtue, Aristotle concentrates on the latter, organizing the analysis into three main sections. The first deals with the formation of virtue; the second defines its nature; and the third explores the individual ethical virtues in detail. The discussion of the genesis of ethical virtue is thus presented as a necessary condition for understanding its essence.[7] This methodological priority is justified on two grounds. First, Aristotle's treatise is guided by a practical aim: knowing how to become morally excellent takes precedence over knowing what moral excellence is. Aristotle himself underscores the purpose of the inquiry in these terms:

> Since, then, the present inquiry does not aim at theoretical knowledge like the others (for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use), we must examine the nature of actions, namely how we ought to do them; for these determine also the nature of the states of character that are produced, as we have said. (Aristotle, *NE* II 2, 1103b26-31)

Second, a genetic analysis of ethical virtue makes it possible to isolate and examine individually all the elements involved in its

6 From here onwards I will follow the English translation of *NE* given by D.W. Ross, available in `https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.2.ii.html`. Nevertheless, I maintain the division of the chapters used by Carlo Natali in his translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* based on Susemihl-Apelt's edition of the text (1912^3).

7 On this issue see Natali 2017, 67-8.

definition – that is, those that constitute its essential structure.

After addressing ethical virtue in both general and particular forms, Aristotle devotes a single book to discussing intellectual virtues (*NE* VI). These include: *phronēsis*, the intellectual disposition to deliberate truthfully in accordance with virtue; *technē*, the disposition to produce things in accordance with truth – that is, in accordance with the definition of the object and the principles of the respective art; *epistēmē*, the disposition to scientific demonstration; *nous*, the intellectual capacity corresponding to the understanding of first principles; and *sophia*, the intellectual disposition that unites both the understanding of first principles and the capacity to produce scientific demonstrations.

Among the intellectual virtues, the one to which Aristotle devotes the most attention is *phronēsis*. As will be shown, this is not the highest virtue, but it is the kind of intellectual excellence most closely connected to both the formation and the essence of ethical virtue. The relatively brief treatment of the intellectual virtues – despite their centrality in determining the ultimate definition of *eudaimonia* – in comparison to the extensive discussion of ethical virtue, raises a well-known and much-debated question concerning the internal coherence of Aristotle's practical philosophy. From the very beginning of the *Ethics*, the practical dimension of inquiry takes precedence over the theoretical, and it constitutes the focus of most of the analysis. Nevertheless, the life of theoretical activity according to virtue is ultimately presented by Aristotle as the highest form of human life.

Two explanations can be offered for this. The first, and most straightforward, is that the intellectual virtues – particularly those essential to the realization of the *bios theoretikos*, such as *epistēmē*, *nous*, and *sophia* – are examined in greater depth in other works that are more directly concerned with epistemological and psychological issues. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, therefore, Aristotle can afford to summarize them only insofar as they serve the purposes of ethical inquiry. The second explanation – one that will require further elaboration later – is that, despite Aristotle's preference for theoretical life, moral excellence is the form of virtue most realistically attainable by the majority of citizens. It is also the kind of excellence over which legislators, rulers, and educators – presumably the primary audience for the ethical discourse presented in the *NE* – can exert the greatest influence. Accordingly, it is the form of virtue to which Aristotle seeks to make the most substantial contribution in this context, by offering a systematic analysis of the conditions under which it becomes possible and can be fully realized.

2.1 The Elements of Ethical Virtue

In analyzing the formation of ethical virtue, Aristotle identifies three characteristic elements. First, virtue is a perfection of our nature brought about by habituation; second, virtue is closely related to pleasure and pain; third, virtue arises from knowledge, deliberate choice, and a stable disposition of character.

To begin with, Aristotle explains that ethical virtue is neither by or according to nature (*physei*) nor contrary to nature (*para physin*), but rather that human beings are naturally capable of acquiring it:

> From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit. 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 the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. (Aristotle, *NE* II 1, 1103a18-32)

Virtue is not by nature for two reasons. First, if virtue were by nature, it would be impossible for a subject to become accustomed to acting contrary to their natural tendencies (just as a stone, which naturally tends to move downward, could never become accustomed to moving upward, even if we threw it in the air many times). The first explanation assumes that, for Aristotle, it is obviously possible to become virtuous in spite of one's natural tendencies. Second, by nature, one first possesses the capacity and then exercises the activity; whereas in the case of virtue, one first exercises the activity and then acquires the stable disposition to act in a particular way. Both of these explanations are likely influenced by Aristotle's physical and biological conceptions, where nature is considered the essence and form of an entity that determines the directionality of its development and, more generally, its behavior. Capacities are seen as innate functions of the living organism that are actualized through interaction with appropriate sensible objects and are temporally prior to their actualization. The fact that virtue is not by nature does

not imply, however, that there are no natural predispositions for its acquisition. In other parts of his work, namely in Book VI, common to both the *Nicomachean* and the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*), as well as in other books of the latter treatise, Aristotle seems to acknowledge the presence of natural traces of virtue or of a character disposition.[8]

This can also be inferred from the above passage, which states that it is in our nature to receive the virtues and that there is a perfection of nature through habit. These statements suggest that, in the case of the acquisition of virtue, there is a natural inclination toward this outcome. Aristotle's thesis, therefore, seems best understood as suggesting that nature is neither a sufficient condition for the development of virtue nor the most relevant condition.[9] From the conclusion that virtue is not by nature, it also seems to follow as a corollary that virtue cannot be against nature. Indeed, it follows from the first explanation of why virtue is not by nature that, if it were against nature, it would not be possible to acquire it. That Aristotle does not feel the need to further elaborate on this point may simply indicate that such an option is clearly contradicted by the facts: people can become virtuous despite their natural tendencies, precisely through habit, education, and conscious choice.

The task, then, is to understand what Aristotle means by "the perfection of nature through habit". At the end of the passage, he proposes an analogy between virtue and art, intended to explain the nature and origin of moral excellence based on the performance excellence typical of craftsmen. Aristotle goes on to explain that virtue, like art, arises from the repetition of the same kind of actions, produces the same kind of actions from which it derives, and is corrupted by actions of a contrary quality:

> Again, it is from the same causes and by the same means that every virtue is both produced and destroyed, and similarly every art; for it is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyre-players are produced. And the corresponding statement is true of builders and of all the rest; men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly. For if this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all men would have been born good or bad at their craft. This, then, is the case with the virtues also; by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence,

8 Arist. *NE* VI 13, 1144b 1-5. On the case of *NE VI* see Baker 2024.

9 On the function of natural endowments in the formation of moral virtue, see Donini 1989 and 2014, and Viano 2008. On habit as a refinement of nature, see Farina 2019; Chiaradonna-Farina 2020; Morel 1997 and 2021.

> we become brave or cowardly. The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some men become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference. (Aristotle, *NE* II 1, 1103b 6-25)

The passage clearly illustrates, through examples of justice in its specific sense of fairness, courage, moderation, and gentleness, how virtue derives from habit: just as one becomes a good musician by consistently practicing one's art well, one becomes virtuous by continually practicing appropriate passions and performing actions of a certain quality – just rather than unjust, courageous rather than cowardly, moderate rather than intemperate, mild rather than aggressive.[10] From this, Aristotle concludes that the education received in early childhood is crucial to the development of excellent forms of conduct.[11]

The reference to desires and passions, as well as the importance of education, leads Aristotle to introduce a new element into his investigation, namely that ethical virtue is related to pleasure and pain.

> For moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of the pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones. Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; for this is the right education. (Aristotle, *NE* II 2, 1104b9-13)

To establish a relationship between virtue and the passions, Aristotle first explains the reasons for immoral conduct, noting that inappropriate feelings of pleasure and pain lead to ignoble behaviors or prevent noble ones. He then further clarifies what he means by inappropriate feelings:

> It is by reason of pleasures and pains that men become bad, by pursuing and avoiding these—either the pleasures and pains they ought not or when they ought not or as they ought not, or by going

10 On the general issue of habituation see Burnyeat 1980; Lockwood 2013; Jimenez 2016; Leunissen 2017; Di Basilio 2021.

11 On this specific passage see Donini 2019, 11.

> wrong in one of the other similar ways that may be distinguished. (Aristotle, *NE* II 2, 1104b 21-23).

From this, Aristotle concludes, on the basis of the logical principle that the characteristics of a term between two opposites can be derived from those of the other by opposition,[12] that virtue depends on the habit of experiencing appropriate feelings of pleasure and pain – that is, for the things for which it is appropriate to have such feelings. He reiterates that such a habit is acquired through proper education. He later clarifies that the existence of inappropriate feelings, that is, when people pursue and avoid pleasures and pains inappropriately, does not imply that to be virtuous one must be apathetic. Rather, it is necessary to have feelings of the right quality. As Aristotle will explain later, passions are part of our nature.

> Hence men even define the virtues as certain states of impassivity and rest; not well, however, because they speak absolutely, and do not say 'as one ought' and 'as one ought not' and 'when one ought or ought not', and the other things that may be added. (Aristotle, *NE* II 2, 1104b23-26)

What the subject acquires by habit is the disposition by which one relates well or poorly to pleasure and pain, that is, one judges correctly or incorrectly:

> There being three objects of choice and three of avoidance, the noble, the advantageous, the pleasant, and their contraries, the base, the injurious, the painful, about all of these the good man tends to go right and the bad man to go wrong, and especially about pleasure; for this is common to the animals, and also it accompanies all objects of choice; for even the noble and the advantageous appear pleasant. (Aristotle, *NE* II 2, 1104b 30-1105a1)

Having established that there is a relationship between virtue and passions, Aristotle provides three reasons why virtue is related to pleasure and pain. The first reason is that virtue pertains to passions and actions, which ultimately lead to pleasure and pain. To return to some of the examples given earlier, courage involves the agent facing dangerous situations that provoke fear and thus pain; moderation involves those desires whose satisfaction leads to sensual pleasure; and so on.

> Again, if the virtues are concerned with actions and passions, and

12 Arist. *Top*. VI 8, 114a 2-4; *Metaph*. IX 2, 1046b 8-9.

> every passion and every action is accompanied by pleasure and pain, for this reason also virtue will be concerned with pleasures and pains. (Aristotle, *NE* II 2, 1104b 13-16)

The second reason is that passions serve as educational tools, insofar as pain can be inflicted as a punishment and pleasure can be used as an incentive:

> This is also evident in the punishments imposed as a result of actions, for punishments are akin to therapies, and therapies by their nature work through opposites.

Finally, pleasure and pain reveal the presence and nature of a certain type of character trait:

> Again, as we said but lately, every state of soul has a nature relative to and concerned with the kind of things by which it tends to be made worse or better. (Aristotle, *NE* II 2 1104b 18-20)

This means that feelings of pleasure and pain reveal the state of an agent's character: a virtuous person, who acts deliberately, takes pleasure in performing noble actions.[13]

These final considerations lead to the introduction of the last essential element in the formation and definition of virtue, namely the rational element. After explaining how a habit is formed, Aristotle recognizes a potential problem that might arise, namely whether the acquisition of virtue and the virtuous behavior that follows are merely the result of mechanical repetition or a superficial adherence to a given behavioral model. Indeed, the emphasis on the recursive nature of the actions that contribute to the formation of a particular character could lead one to believe that the agent does not contribute at all to their moral progress:

> The question might be asked; what we mean by saying that we must become just by doing just acts, and temperate by doing temperate acts; for if men do just and temperate acts, they are already just and temperate, exactly as, if they do what is in accordance with the laws of grammar and of music, they are grammarians and musicians. Or is this not true even of the arts? It is possible to do something that is in accordance with the laws of grammar, either by chance or at the suggestion of another. A man will be

13 While the temperate person, who acts for the sake of the good without truly desiring it, suffers in doing so, the weak person, who, despite knowing how they should act, is driven by the desire for what seems to them to be good but is not, usually regrets their actions; finally, the vicious person enjoys the immediate pleasure of their actions, but the end toward which they are acting is a vice that is likely to cause them pain in the long run.

> a grammarian, then, only when he has both done something grammatical and done it grammatically; and this means doing it in accordance with the grammatical knowledge in himself. Again, the case of the arts and that of the virtues are not similar; for the products of the arts have their goodness in themselves, so that it is enough that they should have a certain character, but if the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character. (Aristotle, *NE* II 3, 1105a 17- 1105b 33)

This passage is significant for two reasons. First, it highlights the limitations of the analogy between art and virtue by specifying that the value of art, or its goodness, lies in the quality of the product, not in the process leading to its creation or in the agent's character. In contrast, a virtuous action is virtuous not only because of its quality, but also because of the agent's moral quality. Second, Aristotle clearly outlines the requirements that an action must meet in order to be considered virtuous. For an action to be virtuous, the agent must act consciously, make a choice, and choose the action for its own sake, acting on the basis of a stable disposition of character. For Aristotle, acting consciously means being fully aware of the circumstances surrounding the action, that is, knowing the who, what, where, by what means, to what end, and how (cf. II 4, 1111a 4-6). Making a choice means that the action has its origin in the agent, not in something external, which is to say that the virtuous action is the result of a deliberative process.[14] Furthermore, choosing an action for its own sake means not acting utilitarianly, to achieve further ends, but because the action is intrinsically beautiful and a good to be pursued for its own sake. For example, a courageous action is virtuous if it is performed for its own sake, and not to gain honors; similarly, a just action is done because it is good for the political community, not to avoid punishment. Finally, a truly virtuous action stems from a firmly established disposition of character. With this clarification, Aristotle seeks to deny that an action can be considered virtuous if it is not the result of the agent's internal moral coherence, but rather the effect of mere external adherence to a code of conduct or the incidental, unintended outcome of chance circumstances. As we shall see, the requirements set forth here help to characterize the process of acquiring virtue and, more specifically, the virtuous action

14 Aristotle's concept of 'deliberation' will be explained later.

that contributes to the formation of a stable character disposition in terms of voluntariness.

2.2 The Definition of Ethical Virtue

Having completed his analysis of the conditions necessary for the realization of virtue, Aristotle can now proceed to consider its essence.[15] In order to define what ethical virtue is, he first attempts to determine its general category. Having already established that by "virtue" he means a characteristic proper to the activity of the human soul par excellence – and thus that virtue is a quality of the soul – Aristotle continues his investigation by identifying three types of qualities present in the soul: *pathos* (passion), *dynamis* (capacity), and *hexis* (state or disposition).

> Next, we must consider what virtue is. Since things that are found in the soul are of three kinds—passions, faculties, states of character, virtue must be one of these. By passions I mean appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friendly feeling, hatred, longing, emulation, pity, and in general the feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain; by faculties the things in virtue of which we are said to be capable of feeling these, e.g. of becoming angry or being pained or feeling pity; by states of character the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions, e.g. with reference to anger we stand badly if we feel it violently or too weakly, and well if we feel it moderately; and similarly with reference to the other passions. Now neither the virtues nor the vices are passions, because we are not called good or bad on the ground of our passions, but are so called on the ground of our virtues and our vices, and because we are neither praised nor blamed for our passions (for the man who feels fear or anger is not praised, nor is the man who simply feels anger blamed, but the man who feels it in a certain way), but for our virtues and our vices we are praised or blamed. Again, we feel anger and fear without choice, but the virtues are modes of choice or involve choice. Further, in respect of the passions we are said to be moved, but in respect of the virtues and the vices we are said not to be moved but to be disposed in a particular way. For these reasons also they are not faculties; for we are neither called good nor bad, nor praised nor blamed, for the simple capacity of feeling the passions; again, we have the faculties by nature, but

15 For a more detailed discussion, see Natali 2017, 72-81, whose analysis is here summarized in broad terms.

> we are not made good or bad by nature; we have spoken of this before. If, then, the virtues are neither passions nor faculties, all that remains is that they should be states of character. (Aristotle, *NE* II 4, 1105b19-1106a4)

In the first place, ethical virtue cannot be identified as a *pathos*. By *pathos*, Aristotle refers specifically to a passion or affection – one of the psychophysical *accidents* (*sumbebēkota*) of the living organism[16] – such as desire, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, affection, hatred, craving, jealousy, pity, and, more generally, any condition accompanied by pleasure or pain.[17] According to Aristotle, while individuals can be praised or blamed for their virtues and vices, they are not subject to moral evaluation – either as excellent or base – merely for experiencing passions. Moreover, while passions are not subject to choice, virtue, as previously discussed, inherently involves choice, or at the very least cannot be acquired independently of it. Nor is ethical virtue to be understood as a *dynamis*, that is, as the capacity to experience the aforementioned passions. This is so for two reasons: first, because one is not judged morally good or bad on the basis of a natural capacity to feel emotions; second, because, as Aristotle has already clarified, capacities exist prior to their exercise, whereas virtue emerges through repeated exercise. The fact that praise and blame are ascribed to virtues and vices – that is, that they are subject to socially reactive practices – entails, for Aristotle, that virtue and vice are voluntary. In other words, unlike *pathē* and faculties, whose principle lies in nature, virtue originates in the agent – that is, in choice. As will be examined more fully later, this consideration prompts Aristotle to introduce a digression in the structure of the *Ethics*: after defining ethical virtue and before analyzing the individual virtues, he returns to the theme of voluntariness in greater depth. Having ruled out that virtue can be a quality of the soul in the sense of either a *pathos* or *dynamis*, it follows that virtue must be a *hexis* – that is, a stable disposition of character, a habitus, in virtue of which one behaves well or badly in relation to the passions.

Having clarified the general category to which virtue belongs, the next step is to better understand what kind of *hexis* it is – that is, to identify its specific difference.

> Thus, we have stated what virtue is in respect of its genus. We

16 Mingucci 2015, 55-112.

17 As rightly suggested by one of the anonymous referee, whom I thank, in relation to this topic and to Aristotle's definition and examples of *pathos*, see Oksenberg Rorty 1984.

> must, however, not only describe virtue as a state of character, but also say what sort of state it is. We may remark, then, that every virtue or excellence both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done well; e.g. the excellence of the eye makes both the eye and its work good; for it is by the excellence of the eye that we see well. Similarly, the excellence of the horse makes a horse both good in itself and good at running and at carrying its rider and at awaiting the attack of the enemy. Therefore, if this is true in every case, the virtue of man also will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well. How this is to happen we have stated already, but it will be made plain also by the following consideration of the specific nature of virtue. In everything that is continuous and divisible it is possible to take more, less, or an equal amount, and that either in terms of the thing itself or relatively to us; and the equal is an intermediate between excess and defect. By the intermediate in the object, I mean that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, which is one and the same for all men; by the intermediate relatively to us that which is neither too much nor too little—and this is not one, nor the same for all. (Aristotle, *NE* II 5, 1106a 14-32)

First, ethical virtue is a stable disposition of character that enables the agent to act in the best possible way – that is, it is a form of functional or performative excellence. Second, virtue is defined as a mean (*mesotēs*) between two opposing extremes. However, Aristotle distinguishes between two types of mean: the mean in itself (*kata to pragma*) and the mean relative to us (*pros hēmas*). The mean in itself is the objective mean, determined mathematically with respect to the object – for instance, given the numbers 2 and 10, the mean is 6. The mean relative to us, on the other hand, is a subjective mean, determined with respect to the agent's particular condition or needs – for example, the moderate amount of food for an individual will depend on their caloric requirements.

Of these two, ethical virtue is a mean relative to us. This, in line with what has been stated, seems to imply two main points for Aristotle. First, virtue is that stable disposition of character which, for each agent, corresponds to a psychological state that lies intermediate between two excessive and opposing states. For example, courage is the mean between cowardice and rashness. Second, virtue is that disposition by which one responds well to passions – that is, by which one performs virtuous actions in emotionally charged situations, and does so on the basis of choice (*prohairesis*).[18]

18 Brown 2014.

A virtuous action is an action characterized by a specific qualitative excellence. As such, it can be understood by analogy to a color that lies within a continuous gradation between two opposing extremes. Courageous action, for example, occupies a position between cowardly and rash action. Virtue, then, is also a mean in the sense that it leads the agent, in any given circumstance, to choose the action that is qualitatively intermediate. Courage, therefore, will be a stable disposition of character by which the agent consistently chooses, within a spectrum bounded by cowardice at one end and rashness at the other, the action that is truly courageous. Having thus clarified what specific type of *hexis* virtue is, Aristotle is now in a position to provide a formal definition of ethical virtue.

> Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice (*proairetikē*), lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect. (Aristotle, *NE* II 6, 1106b36-1107a3)

This definition incorporates all the elements previously discussed. First, ethical virtue is a *hexis* – a stable disposition of character by which the agent relates appropriately to the passions, formed by the repeated performance of actions marked by a certain qualitative excellence. More precisely, virtue is a mean relative to us between two opposing extremes, each of which is a vice in itself. Second, virtue concerns choice. This means, above all, that virtue is the result of a choice: the mean that defines virtue is rationally determined, in the manner in which it would be determined by a person of practical wisdom (*phronimos*).

Two aspects of this clarification are worth highlighting. First, virtue is determined by rational deliberation. Second, in the rational process by which virtuous action is determined, the agent can refer to the example of a wise person. This implies that virtue is grounded in deliberation in accordance with truth, and that such deliberation can be guided by an external model of rationality without undermining the moral agent's autonomy.

Furthermore, virtue concerns choice in another sense: it gives rise to choice. To fully understand this claim, it is necessary to examine further the relationship between ethical virtue, practical wisdom, deliberation, and choice.

3 Virtue and Deliberate Choice

In Aristotelian ethics, *prohairesis* – deliberate choice – is understood as the outcome of a rational process of deliberation. For Aristotle, deliberation entails the investigation of the most appropriate means, given a specific context, to achieve a particular end. A means is deemed appropriate when it aligns with the intended end and is also perceived as desirable by the deliberating agent. Conceptually, such deliberation can be analyzed through the structure of a practical syllogism, in which the major premise (P1) articulates the end of the action, the minor premise (P2) specifies one of the feasible means to realize that end, and the conclusion (C) corresponds to the agent's choice of action.[19] An illustrative example is as follows:

- P1: Digestion promotes health;
- P2: Walking aids digestion;
- C: Therefore, walk.[20]

Here, the major premise defines the *telos* – health – as concretely instantiated in a particular situation. The minor premise identifies a specific means for realizing that *telos*, and the conclusion constitutes the practical resolution: the decision to act. The pivotal component of the deliberative process is P2, which operationalizes the relationship between means and end. For the deliberation to result in effective action – that is, for the agent to carry out the choice made – the means chosen must be both rationally suitable and subjectively desirable. As Aristotle maintains, no action occurs in the absence of desire, which he regards as the fundamental impetus of agency. Suppose, for example, that walking is not desirable for a given agent. Other means conducive to digestion, such as drinking herbal tea or a digestif, might be considered. However, not all available means are equally suited to the higher end of health: while a digestif may aid digestion, it is not necessarily beneficial to health. By contrast, herbal tea may be both healthful and desirable, thereby constituting a valid alternative to walking.

The capacity to engage in correct deliberation – defined as reasoning that is directed toward truth, oriented by the good, and concerned with the appropriate means for achieving it – represents a distinctive excellence of practical reason: *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. This disposition is to be distinguished from mere technical skill (*deinotēs*), which involves identifying effective means to achieve any end, irrespective of its moral value. For Aristotle, *phronesis* is inseparable from ethical virtue: whereas virtue determines the end

19 For a deep analysis of the structure of practical syllogism, see Natali 2001, 63-109.

20 The example comes from Arist., *An. Po.* 94b 8-23. See Natali 2001, 82-84.

e-ISSN 2723-9640

of an action, practical wisdom is the rational faculty that discerns the most fitting means by which the good can be realized.[21]

This allows us to clarify in what sense virtue is both the outcome and the origin of choice. It has been stated that ethical virtue is formed not only by the mechanical repetition of actions of a certain quality, but also by the fact that the agent actively chooses such actions. Therefore, starting from a good character disposition, whether due to natural temperament or proper upbringing, the agent contributes to the rational formation of virtue by deliberating on the appropriate means for achieving the good in each situation. To do so, as the definition indicates, the agent may also be inspired by the reasoning of the wise person. Once ethical virtue is acquired, it will determine the end of the action, that is, the major premise or principle of the practical syllogism. In this sense, ethical virtue will be capable of producing choices. For example, the virtue of courage is formed by courageous actions chosen for their own sake, and it in turn produces courageous choices, insofar as it establishes the end for which one should act in each circumstance.

The complex relationship between virtue, deliberation, and choice leads Aristotle to reflect on the nature of the actions that underlie the formation of character, as well as those actions that arise from a stable disposition. Indeed, part of his inquiry is aimed at establishing that agents are responsible for their actions and for the formation of their habitual states, whether virtuous or vicious. He therefore outlines the conditions under which an action can be considered voluntary or involuntary (Arist. *NE* III 1-3, 1109b 30-1111b3). Involuntary actions are those performed under force or violence, that is, actions caused by an external source, or those performed out of ignorance, meaning that the agent is unaware of the relevant circumstances. Voluntary actions, on the other hand, are those in which the principle and cause reside within the acting subject, and the agent is aware of the circumstances. In the case of non-rational living beings, such as animals and children, this principle and cause can be identified with the desiring impulse. As for rational human beings, voluntary actions are those that involve a choice, either actual or potential. In addition to voluntary and involuntary actions, there are non-voluntary actions – those that are performed out of ignorance but are not accompanied by pain – and mixed actions – those that may also have an external principle and cause, but to whose realization the agent can still contribute, for example by revising their plans in response to externally induced circumstances. [22]

21 On *phronesis* see in particular Natali 2001 and Coope 2012.

22 On non-voluntary and mixed actions see now Farina 2024, 88, 102-3 (non-voluntary actions) and 92 (mixed actions).

In this discussion, Aristotle's aim is to assert, possibly in contrast to a limited and misleading interpretation of Socratic intellectualism, that an agent is responsible for their habitual states, whether good or bad, as well as for the actions that contribute to their formation and those that derive from them.[23] However, scholars have raised various concerns about the coherence and effectiveness of Aristotle's explanation. Specifically, the question has been raised whether the philosopher is really able to justify the claim that action originates from the agent within a theoretical framework that, on one hand, conceives of choice as the outcome of a rational process already teleologically determined by the habitual state and limited to the search for the suitable means to achieve the given end and, on the other hand, treats the habitual state as the result of environmental and educational factors and as unidirectional.

In this regard, scholarship has been divided.[24] Some argue that Aristotle is a determinist, insofar as action is ultimately the result of a habitual state over which the agent does not exercise full control, and which conditions their choices.[25] Others maintain that, given Aristotle's complex causal theory, his philosophy of action cannot be reduced to a form of modern determinism, arguing that choice – understood as the form of action ultimately traceable to the subject – represents its original principle.[26] At this point, without attempting to interpret Aristotle's practical philosophy retrospectively on the basis of contemporary philosophical sensibilities or extrinsic categories, it is sufficient to note that Aristotle probably contributed to the emergence and development of what, at a much later stage in the history of philosophy, would be called the 'Free Will Problem'. He did so by clearly raising the question of the principle and origin of actions and habitual states, by attempting to define the nature and function of choice in human praxis, and ultimately by establishing a link between choice and contingency.

23 As one of the anonymous referee, whom I thank, notices "Socratic intellectualism closely connects (or, on a strong reading, identifies) moral evil with ignorance, but one may hardly claim that this entails the complete denial of human responsibility".

24 For an overview of the debate, see Natali 2014.

25 Among others, Bobzien 2014. Donini 1989 and 2014 attribute a form of moderate determinism to Aristotle.

26 Chiaradonna, Farina 2020, 33-4; Natali 2004.

4 Choice and Contingency

In this regard, it is worth recalling Chapter 6 of Book II of the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*), where, after providing the definition of ethical virtue, Aristotle shifts his inquiry to exploring the conditions under which virtue is morally praiseworthy. In particular, he seeks to clarify that virtue must be voluntary and produce choice. To achieve this, he reflects on what it means for humans, uniquely among animals, to be the principle of a particular kind of movement – namely, action.

The passage is complex, both textually and conceptually,[27] and here we will limit ourselves to outlining its general framework. Aristotle begins by asserting that living substances are by nature principles of some kind (*EE* II 6, 1222b 15-16). The term 'nature' here refers to the internal aspect through which a substance undergoes change, or the set of its essential properties and vital functions. Aristotle argues, for example, that every substance, by virtue of its nature, generates products of the same kind (1222b 16-18). Among living substances, human being alone is the principle of action (1222b 18-20).

At this point, Aristotle introduces a distinction between *kuriai* (dominant) principles and immobile principles. The *kuriai* principles are principles of motion or moving causes. Among these, some are more *kuriai* than others. The *archai kuriai* in the strictest sense are those that, in addition to being moving causes, also produce results that could not occur otherwise. Aristotle exemplifies this type of principle with the divine being, most likely referring to the Platonic Demiurge, whose goodness is described in the *Timaeus* (29e-30a) as the highest *kuria* principle of generation and order (1222b 20-23).

From the example provided, it can be inferred that a dominant principle is not only something that initiates change, but also something that qualifies and directs it.

The *immobile principles*, on the other hand, are exemplified by the premises of a demonstration in which the dominant or properly moving function is absent. These principles are discussed by analogy with the other principles, using terminology reminiscent of the language of physics. For example, it is said that from a premise or hypothesis, a conclusion *gignetai* (comes into being), and that in order to change the conclusion, one must change the premise and demonstrate the new conclusion from the new premise (1222b 23-28). Aristotle will use the analogy with *immobile principles* of a mathematical demonstrative type to establish a parallel between the operation of the *kuriai* principles and mathematical hypotheses (1222b 29-31).

27 On this passage, see especially Broadie 1991; Donini 1999; Kenny 1979 and 2011; Meyer 2011; Rowe 2023; Simpson 2013; Woods 1992.

The introduction of both *kuriai* principles in the strict sense, exemplified by the divine principle, and the immobile principles helps to characterize human being as a principle of motion: the human being, like a god, is a dominant principle, meaning that it is from him that motion derives and by virtue of which motion is qualified in a particular way. Unlike the divine principle, however, the human being is not the principle of things that cannot be otherwise than they are, but of things that could be otherwise than they are – that is, of contingent things whose occurrence depends on whether the agent acts or refrains from acting (*eph'autoi*).

The comparison with mathematical premises serves to highlight that, unlike mathematical conclusions, which not only necessarily follow from the principle but are also necessary because of a necessary property of the principle itself, human actions are contingent. In other words, human actions derive from a principle that is itself contingent because of a mutable property (1222b 31-41). Aristotle seems to suggest that this mutable property is, in fact, choice (*prohairesis*) (1223a 9-23).

From this chapter of the *EE* it can be inferred that the human being is a principle in the sense that he is both the efficient and formal first cause of action in a way that depends on whether he acts or refrains from acting. Thus, given a choice, action necessarily follows, but the choice itself is not necessary.[28]

The problem that arises at this point, however, is whether and how the contingency of choice as outlined in the *EE*, which finds no counterpart in Aristotle's other works, is compatible with the decision-making model described in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*). Within the framework of the *NE*, which was perhaps intended for a broader audience and focused more on the moral training necessary and complementary to the political education of each citizen, Aristotle may have emphasized more the recursive elements, the coherence, and the stabilization of human behavior, omitting an analysis that, in addition to emphasizing the contingent aspect, relied on complex and technical philosophical doctrines. This does not mean, however, that Aristotle abandoned the attempt to reconcile moral habit, deliberation, choice, and contingency within a single theory.

At least four levels of his account reveal how this particular conjunction is realized: first, at the beginning of the formation of ethical virtue, choice contributes to the determination of the quality of habit; second the search for the most appropriate means to

28 For further analysis of Aristotle, *EE* II 6, see also Farina 2024, 17-29. As for me, I presented the chapter during the Aristotelian Symposium devoted to the *Eudemian Ethics* II in 2017 and refer to that text for a more detailed and in-depth analysis (F. Masi, *The controlling principle of action. Aristotle,* Eudemian Ethics *II 6*)

achieve the goal in any practical circumstance opens up a range of possibilities; third it is up to the agent to do or not to do the things over which he exercises deliberation and actions belong to entities that may be otherwise than they are, and finally the kind of mean in which virtuous action consists is not a mathematical point but a segment – within certain variable limits – of a continuum bounded by two opposing extremes.

In light of this analysis, it can be suggested that, although virtue, once acquired, becomes a kind of moral instinct capable of determining qualitatively coherent choices,[29] virtuous action, far from being the result of automatic or thoughtless behavior, is the outcome of a choice that is at once voluntary, deliberate, and contingent.

Bibliography

Baker, S. (2024). "Nicomachean Revision in the 'Common Books': The Case of *NE* VI. (≈ *EE* V.) 2". *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 63, 193-236.

Bobzien, S. (2014). "Choice and Moral Responsibility (*NE* iii 1-5)". Polansky, R. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics. New York: Cambridge University Press, 81-10.

Broadie, S. (1991). *Ethics with Aristotle*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brown, L. (2014). "Why Is Aristotle's Virtue of Character a Mean? Taking Aristotle at His Word (*NE* ii 6)". Polansky, R. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics. New York: Cambridge University Press, 64-80.

Burnyeat, M. (1980). "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good". Oksenberg Rorty, A. (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. Berkeley: University California Press, 69-92.

Chiaradonna, R.; Farina, F. (2020). "Il carattere come seconda natura in Aristotele". *Paradigmi*, 1, 23-38.

Coope, U. (2012). "Why Does Aristotle Think that Ethical Virtue Is Required for Practical Wisdom?". *Phronesis*, 57, 142-63.

Di Basilio, G. (2021). "Habituation in Aristotle's Ethics: The *Eudemian Ethics*, the Common Books, the *Nicomachean Ethics*'". *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 59, 531-57.

Donini, P.L. (1989). Ethos. *Aristotele e il determinismo*. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso.

Donini, P.L. (1999). *Aristotele,* Etica Eudemia. Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza.

Donini, P.L (2014). *Abitudine e saggezza: Aristotele dall'*Etica Eudemia *all'*Etica Nicomachea. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso.

Donini, P.L. (2019). "Le due (o tre) etiche del corpus aristotelico". Masi, F.; Maso, S.; Viano, C. (eds), Ethike Theoria*, Studi in onore di Carlo Natali*. Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 3-25.

Farina, F. (2019). "La natura e gli stati abituali nell'Etica aristotelica. Analogie e Differenze". Bagnati, G.; Cassan, M.; Morelli, A.; *La verità del naturalismo*. Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 31-45.

29 Frede 2014, 49; Farina 2019, 39-43; Chiaradonna, Farina 2020, 33.

Farina, F. (2024). *Le* Etiche *di Aristotele*. *La responsabilità morale, gli agenti e la* polis. Pisa: Edizioni ETS. Res Singulares. Testi e studi di storia della filosofia.

Frede D. (2014). "Free Will in Aristotle?". Destrée, P.; Salles, R.; Zingano, M. (eds), *What is up to us? Studies on Causality and Responsibility in Ancient Philosophy.* Sankt Augustin: Akademia Verlag, 39-57.

Jimenez, M. (2016). "Aristotle on Becoming Virtuous by Doing Virtuous Actions". *Phronesis*, 6, 3-32.

Kenny, A. (1979). *Aristotle's Theory of the Will*. London: Duckworth.

Kenny, A. (2011). *Aristotle. Eudemian Ethics*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leunissen, M. (2017). *From Natural Character to Moral Virtue in Aristotle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lockwood, T.C. (2013). "Habituation, Habit, and Character in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*". Sparrow, T.; Hutchinson, A. (eds), *A History of Habit. From Aristotle to Bourdieu*. Lanham: MD, 19-36.

Meyer, S. (2011). "Aristotle on What Is Up to Us and What Is Contingent". Destrée, P. et al. (eds), *What is up to us? Studies on Agency and Responsibility in Ancient Philosophy.* Sankt Augustine: Academia Verlag, 75-89.

Mingucci, G. (2015). *La fisiologia del pensiero in Aristotele*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Morel, P.-M. (1997). "L'habitude: une seconde nature?". Morel, P.-M. (éd.), *Aristote et la notion de nature. Enjeux épistémologiques et pratiques*. Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires, 131-48.

Morel, P.-M. (2021). *La nature et le bien. L'éthique d'Aristote et la question naturaliste*. Louvain-La-Neuve: Peeters.

Natali, C. (1999). *Aristotele.* Etica Nicomachea. Roma Bari: Laterza. Classici della Filosofia con testo a fronte.

Natali, C. (2001). *The Wisdom of Aristotle*. New York: Suny Press.

Natali, C. (2004). *L'action efficace: études sur la philosophie de l'action d'Aristote*. Louvain-La-Neuve: Peeters.

Natali, C. (2014). "Aristotele e il determinismo". De Caro, M.; Mori, M.; Spinelli, E. (eds), *Libero arbitrio Storia di una controversia filosofica*. Roma: Carocci Editore, 18-30.

Natali C. (2017). *Il metodo e il trattato. Saggio sull'*Etica Nicomachea. Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura.

Oksenberg Rorty, A. (1984). "Aristotle on the Metaphysical Status of 'Pathe'". *The Review of Metaphysics*, 37(3), 521-46.

Perissinotto, L. (2019). *Il naturalismo oggi*. *Abbozzo di una mappa e alcune riflessioni*. Bagnati, G.; Cassan, M.; Morelli, A. (eds), *La verità del naturalismo*, Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 11-29.

Piazza, M. (2018). *Creature dell'abitudine. Abito, costume, seconda natura da Aristotele alle scienze cognitive*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Rowe, C. (2023). *Aristotle's Eudemian Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Simpson, P.L.P. (2013). *The Eudemian Ethics of Aristotle*. New Brunswick; London: Transaction Publishers.

Susemihil, F.; Apelt, O. (eds) (1912[3]). *Aristotelis ethica Nicomachea*. Lipsiae: Teubner.

Viano, C. (2008). "Aristotle and the Starting Point of Moral Development: The Notion of Natural Virtue". Stern-Gillet, S.; Corrigan, K. (eds), *Aristotle and Neoplatonism. Essays in Honor of Denis O' Brien*, vol. 2. Leiden: Brill, 23-42.

Woods, M. (1992). *Aristotle* Eudemian Ethics*.* Books I, II and VIII. Transl. with a Commentary by M. Woods. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA
Vol. 6 — Num. 2 — December 2025

Triadic Law of Habit
Reflecting on David Hartley's Theory and Practice of Moral Development

Catherine Dromelet
Università Roma Tre, Italy

Abstract This paper reconstructs and frames David Hartley's triadic law of habit as foundational to his neurophilosophy of moral development. Extending the focus onto his implementation of the 'Rule of Life' – a natural principle of moral progress –, it argues that the super-empirical reality referred to in Hartley's mystical vocabulary is emotionally invested by his own practice. Through an examination of his methods – particularly meditation and language cultivation – the paper presents Hartley as a meaningful interlocutor on the issue of moral stagnation and reflects on his relevance to the contemporary challenge of social fragmentation.

Keywords David Hartley. Language. Practical philosophy. Mysticism. Habit.

Index 1 Introduction. – 2 A Triadic Law of Habit. – 3 Practice of Moral Development. – 4 Conclusion.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-05-12
Accepted 2025-09-01
Published 2025-12-10

Open access

Citation Dromelet, Catherine (2025). "Triadic Law of Habit". *JoLMA*, 6(2), 79-96.

DOI 10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2025/02/006

1 Introduction

Doing philosophy as a living can require that we focus on theory and practice in different ways. For example, one may say that an academic philosopher tends to work mostly with concepts, theories, positions and justifications, while a philosophical practitioner pays attention to the impact of philosophical beliefs and presuppositions on people's life, and vice-versa. Arguably, several human sciences including philosophy have started to focus on practices only since the 1980s (Schatzki 2001), and philosophical practice like counseling is still considered an emerging field of professional activity (Gruengard 2023). However, several historical thinkers, especially in the ancient tradition, already were practitioners in their day (Grosso 2005). Whenever possible, knowing both an author's theories and life allows us to understand the existential stakes of their philosophical blueprint in greater depth. In the present paper I will reconstruct David Hartley's triadic law of habit in his neurophilosophy of moral development, based on arguments derived from his main philosophical publication: *Observations on Man*; I will then argue that the religious vocabulary employed by Hartley, the empirical and super-empirical phenomenology that he refers to when advocating the practical benefits of moral virtue reflect his own religious practice as a philosopher. But why is David Hartley – eighteenth century philosopher and physician – relevant today in the first place?

In a recent essay entitled *Psychopolitics*, the philosopher and cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han writes about a 'neoliberal' work culture – driven by internalized self-exploitative habits of productivity – that contributes to mental exhaustion on a mass scale and a rise in chronic nervous disorders. To prevent fatigue and increase performance, he reckons, the daily use of neuroenhancement substances and assorted bio-hacking techniques has become mainstream (Han 2017). Extending the diagnosis in *The Palliative Society,* Han observes that the avoidance of pain and suffering has been elevated to what amounts to a quasi-constitutional right. These attitudes reduce life to a matter of lonely biological survival and utility, thereby stripping existence from most of its metaphysical appeal. More importantly, it is quietly displacing an older, collective therapeutic practice: the weaving of a shared narrative through which pain and suffering can be interpreted, dignified, and endured in common (Han 2021). While Han's bold characterization of a certain metamodern moral dissolution may resonate with a broader current public debate, it also echoes concerns voiced almost three centuries earlier.

Around 1734 David Hartley writes two treatises on *The Progress of Happiness deduced from Reason – & from Scriptures* that he later recasts and publishes in 1749 as one treatise entitled *Observations on Man; His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations* (Allen 1999, 290).

In this work David Hartley contends that human beings, despite their finely tuned physical composition, are most of the time laboring under a set of destructive illusions. Chief among these is the tendency for individuals to be grossly self-interested, to the point of their own misery. Relentless devotion to immediate pleasure makes people ill through bad habits. Engagement in business affairs, and involvement with civil and religious institutions – each perpetually vulnerable to corruption – can likewise generate affliction. At best, Hartley maintains, disease, injustice, and other calamities can be opportunities to focus on what truly matters and make wiser decisions. This diagnosis of the human predicament is immediately followed by a complementary moral prescription. Even though our 'Body Natural' remains subject to the laws of nature and the 'Body Politic' to the laws of humankind, Hartley insists that the mind possesses a spiritual dimension that alone conduces to genuine happiness; attuned to 'the Deity' through meditative practices and the cultivation of words, the mind forges and shares a form of communication (linguistic or non-) that binds a community together. After the end of time, he specifies, human beings, and possibly animals, too, will merge into one 'Mystical Body' (OM1.4.3.96, 462; OM2.3.6.68, 287).

Early critic of modernity, Hartley notices a tendency for his contemporaries to fall into self-centered delusions that deflect their attention from the spiritual significance of their life. Most of them can spend years ignoring that the ceaseless pursuit of 'gross Self-interest' cannot bring them the highest degree of happiness (OM1.4.3.96). They are generally unaware of the conditions for their moral development and the degree of their responsibility in this matter. Despite this alarmist observation, Hartley argues that human beings are naturally bound to develop moral sense. He calls this natural principle the 'Rule of Life'. His philosophical position raises two practical questions for us: How can we best follow the 'Rule of Life', when our mental bandwidth is almost entirely absorbed by everyday anxieties? If Hartley detected this issue in his day, did he provide any plan of action to cultivate moral development in the face of various forms of psycho-social determinism?

To address these questions, the first part of this paper offers a synthetic exposition of Hartley's theory of moral development, structured around a triadic law of habit that can be extracted from the first part of his *Observations*. In Hartley's account, human agency is largely shaped by education, past experiences, and entrenched habits. The second part – and central pivot – of the paper therefore turns to Hartley's theory of practice, focusing especially on meditation and the cultivation of language as effective transversal resources to reshape our habits and refine our moral sentiments. I conclude the paper with a consideration on the ritualistic dimension of Hartley's practice of moral development, and its relevance today. The aim is

to offer a reflection on this eighteenth-century philosopher, who may serve as a meaningful interlocutor in discussions on contemporary issues of moral progress and social fragmentation.

2 A Triadic Law of Habit

In the history of psychology, Hartley is presented as a pioneer of the associationist school, because he developed and substantiated Locke's doctrine of the association of ideas (Dacey 2022). Indeed, in the 1700 edition of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Locke affirms that the mind sometimes, pathologically, associates ideas that have nothing in common, only because experience joined them repeatedly over time, or because they appeared together in the mind by chance and were fastened by a strong passion; this phenomenon is especially common in children (Locke 1975 2.33; 1996 §137-8). Despite explicit reference to Locke, Hartley uses this theory to describe the totality of mental operations, including non-pathological ones. He supports associative psychology with a neurological account of brain vibrations, based on cutting-edge discoveries on electricity during the 1740s, which makes him also a pioneer in the history of neurosciences (Glassman, Buckingham 2007).

2.1 Vibrationism and the Fluctuations of Nervous Sensibility

When Hartley writes the *Observations on Man* one of his main scientific goals is to demonstrate that the best way to think about brain activity is in terms of nervous vibrations. After explaining that nerves are neither strings – Descartes's position –, nor tubes – Boerhaave's – he explains, inspired by Newton, that they consist of molecules moving in ether. Brain and nerves are made of a vibrating matter, which is active by default, and retains any mark that is frequently imprinted on it (OM 1.1.1.3, OM1.1.1.5). Nervous vibrations occurring in the brain are smaller than those in the rest of the body, which is why Hartley calls them 'vibratiuncles', 'miniature vibrations', or just 'miniatures'.

When a body receives sensory inputs, the vibratory motion of the nerves on which the sensation is imprinted undergoes a slight modification that is automatically carried towards the brain. The sensation can be pleasurable or painful at first. With repetition, the vibratory modification imprinted on the nerves by the sensory input can lose its ability to signal pleasure or pain. Repeated sensory inputs can turn the natural vibratory motion of the nerves into an altered, 'preternatural' state, where memorized preternatural vibratiuncles can become permanent.

> It is not unsuitable to the Doctrine of Vibrations, that the frequent Repetitions of the same external Impressions should have the Power of converting original Pains into Pleasures, and Pleasures into mere Sensations, *i.e.* into evanescent Pleasures; as we find it has in Fact. For this may be effected by such a Change in the Organ and Brain, as that the Organ shall send weaker and weaker Vibrations perpetually to the Brain, upon every successive Renewal of the same Impression, and the Brain become perpetually less and less disposed to receive strong Vibrations, though the Power of Communication from the Impression should continue the same. (OM1.1.1.6, 38)

Repeated vibrations, and the decrease of sensation they occasion, explain the transformation of sensory pleasures and pains into intellectual ones. The discrepancy between the fixation of a miniature vibration upon repeated sensory input, as in the case of memory, and the decrease of sensation initially associated to the sensory input supports Hartley's claim that ideas are not reducible to vibrations. Ideas and vibrations correspond, but they are not reducible to one another. "[H]owever impossible it may be to discover in what Way Vibrations cause, or are connected with, Sensations, or Ideas, *i.e.* tho' Vibrations be of a corporeal, Sensations and Ideas of a mental Nature" (OM1.1.1.5, 34). To the variety of ideas that a person has, corresponds a variety of miniature vibrations that differ in 'Degree, Kind, Place, and Line of Direction'.

Miniature vibrations, when they occur in a bundle, can form a tendency, in various areas of the brain, to vibrate in a certain way. Miniatures do not 'associate' like ideas do, by losing their identity in the mix. Rather, they collectively dispose the brain to adopt a specific state of vibratory motion, which has a qualitatively different impact on the nervous system than the original vibratory state, previous to the bundle of sensory inputs.

> Hence we may conceive, that a very complex Set of Vibrations, arising from the Mixture and Combinations of Degree, Kind, Place, and Line of Direction, exists always in the medullary Substance [*i.e.* brain matter], being kept up by its Heat, and the Pulsation of its Arteries, when other Causes are wanting, almost in the same manner as in a Concert of Music the Air is agitated by Vibrations of a very complex Kind. (OM1.1.2.9, 63-4)

The doctrine of vibrations describes the mechanical underpinnings of mental life in Hartley's philosophy. It emphasizes a physical order corresponding to thoughts and sensations, and prepares the ground for Hartley's account of language, contained in his doctrine of association. Vibrationism introduces a dimension of receptivity

and resistance, in the framework of which the material modifications that the mind produces in the body can be grasped. It especially characterizes the way a sensory input that repeats itself on the nervous system progressively erodes the sensation of pain or pleasure that it used to carry with it originally. While vibrationism has been rejected, in the history of science, as a valid candidate to describe nervous activity, Hartley's account may resonate with contemporary hypotheses in cognitive neurosciences, stipulating that the brain is characterized by patterns of oscillatory neuronal activity working at different frequency ranges (Viola, Zanin 2017).

2.2 Associationist Account of Reason and Action

For Hartley, association of ideas is a law describing and predicting the mental mechanisms that are necessary for learning processes, including imitative behavior, movement coordination, language acquisition, and mental operations in general. In this section I focus on the role of association in language – a central piece in Hartley's practice of moral development, which I also discuss in the second part of this paper.

"*Ideas of Sensation* may be termed *simple*, *intellectual* ones *complex*" (OM1, II). When two simple sensory ideas repeatedly occur together, their respective brain vibrations can combine (complex ideas), and when they occur in a succession, they can trigger one another (associated ideas) (OM1.2.10). Complex ideas can be further associated to form 'decomplex ideas' (OM1.1.2.12 cor.4-5). If a complex idea is composed of many simple ideas, it may appear that it does not resemble its constituting elements. (OM1.1.2.12 cor. 1). Unlike Locke, for whom associations of ideas are almost impossible to undo, Hartley contends that dreams can disassociate ideas that do not belong together.

> The Wilderness of our Dreams seems to be of singular Use to us, by interrupting and breaking the Course of our Associations. For, if we were always awake, some accidental Associations would be so much cemented by Continuance, as that nothing could afterwards disjoin them; which would be Madness. (OM1.3.5.91 cor. 2, 389)

Idea complexification resulting from association produces the basis on which language can be established. Hartley approaches language and knowledge together from the angle of the doctrine of association (OM1.3.1.85). He observes that a child learns to speak words by associating sounds that correspond to ideas. This simple thing corresponds to a complex process in the vibratory motion of the brain, where the vibration of a sensory idea, for instance, coalesces

with the vibrations of a series of sounds heard (syllables), and with that of the muscles used to repeat the word. The word thus formed in the child's brain becomes the interface between his inner life and the world outside (OM1.3.1.80; see also Allen 2024).

All the ideas that we receive from experience do not necessarily have words associated to them, and this may include sensory and intellectual ideas. For example, complex ideas deriving from our experience of musical or chromatic (dis)harmonies do not always have names (OM1.3.1.85, scholium). Unless we invent new words that capture the gist of these complex intellectual or sensory ideas, old ones may be used figuratively, being translated from one register of experience to another, to describe a new experience by analogy with an old one (OM1.3.1.82). Relatedly, not all words refer to sensations or thoughts that we have experienced ourselves, either personally or vicariously. This is why many words impact the mind differently, from one person to the next. Yet, words that refer to phenomena that we have never experienced first-hand can cause, by association with words referring to things that we did experience first-hand, new vibratory motion in the brain, generate sensations in the body, and thus orient actions and behavior (OM1.3.1.79). The existence of language and other forms of expression (e.g. artistic), which are indispensable for mental life, are explained by Hartley in terms of associations of ideas.

2.3 Affective Transfer

Association of ideas and the affective transfer it generates plays a crucial role in the advent of moral sense. It allows individuals to develop concern for metaphysical entities – such as moral or religious ideas – that lie beyond their immediate field of sensory experience. This evolution hinges on the capacity for pleasure and pain attending simple sensations to grow weaker, with repetition, and on the affective charge to be redirected towards abstract intellectual objects. This dynamic is essential for moral formation and takes place involuntarily most of the time. However, it can be instrumentalized through specific habit-forming practices, as we will see in the second part of this paper. How does affective transfer happen?

Hartley's doctrine of transfer, hidden within his doctrines of vibration and association, mainly describes the phenomenon by which sensory qualities can disappear and give rise to intellectual pleasures and pains by means of an affective investment in transcendent, metaphysical entities. Unlike movement and aggregation, respectively distinctive of vibration and association, transfer is the metamorphic principle allowing change. It is thus crucial in moral development. Transfer is involved in four types of phenomena. First, it allows for

the re-dimensioning or conversion of sensory inputs into ideas, and the related fluctuation in pleasure or pain. Second, it is responsible for the partial redirection of pain or pleasure attending a sensation towards the word designating that very sensation, once we learn that word. In the same way, it partly redirects the pleasure or pain towards its inferred cause. Third, transfer is instrumental to the mutation of a reactive attitude into a preemptive behavior, where passion metamorphoses into habit. Fourth, and related to all previous items, transfer invests a person's emotions into metaphysical entities, that would otherwise exist only as pure associations of ideas, devoid of any moral, epistemic, or practical authority.

Supporting the claim that sensory pleasure and pain experienced first-hand, often in childhood, are gradually transferred onto intellectual ideas by association, over our lifespan, Hartley holds that our strongest intellectual (complex) pains are invested by sensory (simple) pains coming from early experiences of touch – 'feeling' –, because early on in life, the sense of touch provided us with the greatest number of unpleasant sensations (OM1.2.1.33). Similarly, Hartley reckons, our strongest intellectual pleasures contain mostly miniatures of simple sensory pleasures of taste, because the sense of taste encompasses the widest variety of pleasures (OM1.2.2.44).

It is not absurd to assume that Hartley, who claims to be inspired by John Gay's 1732 *Preliminary Dissertation, Concerning the Fundamental Principle of Virtue and Morality* when it comes to explaining moral affections in associationist terms, also was inspired by the concept of transfer which Gay employs in the same *Dissertation*. In Gay's view, transfer follows naturally from association:

> [W]e find this power of Association so great as not only to transport our Passions and Affections beyond their proper bounds, both as to Intenseness and Duration [...] but also, that it is able to transfer them to improper Objects, and such as are of a quite different Nature from those to which our Reason had at first directed them. (Gay 1732, LV)

Hartley does not differentiate explicitly between association and transfer either; it seems to him, as it does to Gay, that the latter is a necessary consequence of the former and has no separate authority. At the same time, they agree that transfer characterizes the affective dimension of association. Is is the principle by which a feeling of pleasure or pain partly leaves an idea of sensation and transmits affective capacity to a more complex idea, ultimately supplying intellectual ideas with the power to stir sensations. The distinction between association and transfer amounts to that between conceptualizing many ideas and developing feelings towards some of them – like being able to imagine different kinds of sofas to furnish a

living room but then choosing only one of them to buy. Transfer thus emerges as a doctrine of its own right as it introduces something qualitatively different from mere association. At the same time, there would be no transfer without associated ideas to invest emotionally.

Drawing on arguments from his interpretation of Newtonian physics, Hales's chemistry, and Lockean associative psychology, Hartley contends that our direct experience of the world fosters moral development through a succession of natural stages of sublimation, in which sensual pleasures are gradually transformed into intellectual ones. Echoing Joseph Butler's 'double law of habit' *avant la lettre* – whereby repetition diminishes feeling while enhancing the capacity for action – I argue that Hartley adds 'transfer' as a third principle. What is identified today as a double law of habit – (1) the diminution of sensation and (2) the increase in the capacity to act – is thereby expanded, in Hartley's works, into a triadic law: (1) sensation decreases (OM1.1.1.6,38-39; OM1.1.2.9,58-64), (2) the capacity to act increases (OM1.1.2.14 cor. 5, 82), and (3) intention is redirected (OM1.1.2.14 cor. 8, 82; OM1.2.1.33, 143; OM1.2.2.44, 166; OM1.3.1.80, 283; OM1.4.5.98, 487; OM2.3.53, 228, among other passages). This triadic law integrates Hartley's doctrines of vibration, association, and transfer, constituting the theoretical foundation for the dynamic model of inner development, called the 'Rule of Life', which he derives from common sense and biblical teachings.

This triadic law raises the question of whether Hartley's system presents distinct levels of explanation or a genuine theoretical unity. Are the doctrines of vibration, association, and transfer merely parallel mechanisms, or are they organically interconnected? I argue that they are systematically interdependent in Hartley's account of moral development. Vibrationism addresses the physiological level by describing the workings of the brain, while associationism accounts for the workings of the mind. Transfer introduces a developmental dimension: it captures an inner dynamic of body and mind through which new entities – intellectual pleasures or pains – come into being and can be both conceptualized and *felt*. In this way, transfer not only complements but also supports the doctrines of vibration and association, pointing towards a unified theory of moral development.

3 Practice of Moral Development

With a materialist ontology of cerebral activity and a principle of association that operates automatically, Hartley's account emphasizes the mind's mechanistic dimension and its place within a broader context of natural creatures. The power of association is such that it enables people to live on 'auto-pilot' mode, so to speak, most of the time.

> Persons who read inattentively, *i.e.* see and speak almost without remembring, also those who labour under such a morbid Loss of Memory, as that though they see, hear, speak, and act, *pro re nata*, from Moment to Moment, yet they forget all immediately, somewhat resemble the Persons who walk and talk in Sleep. (OM1.3.5.91, 387)

This depiction, embedded in Hartley's account of dreams, may recall a certain dissociated way of living today. No specific problem can be identified if the unconscious habits characterizing the 'auto-pilot' way of living are perfect. They are typically not, however, and if we omit to interrupt our daily activities to reflect on the habits that no longer serve us, and try to correct them, then we are making ourselves more miserable than necessary.

Association and transfer, when left unattended, can escalate. In his associative account of sympathetic pleasures and pains, Hartley examines the case of anger. When a child is repeatedly victim of violence, they will associate the sensory pain with 'signs and tokens' from the environment (e.g. a person, a wallpaper, a smell, etc.), thus transferring miniature pains onto them. This chain of affective association – 'long Train of associated Remainders' – will protract their negative emotion in time, giving rise to the 'Passion of Anger' (OM1.4.5.97, 479). Association and transfer will also lead the child to designate the cause of their pain, and adapt their defensive behavior, eventually developing a preemptive attitude in the anticipation of future violence (OM1.4.5.97, 479).

> [T]hese Two Things have great Influence on each other. Our threatening Harm merely from a Motive of Security, leads us to wish it really; and wishing it leads us to threaten and inflict it, where it can afford no Security or Advantage to us. (OM1.4.5.97, 480)

The interplay between passive receptivity and active resistance has a gradual influence on a person's character. In the present example the passion of anger mutates naturally into a habit of cruelty.

> Cruelty and Malice are considered, not as Passions of the Mind, but as Habits, as the deliberate wishing of Misery to others [...] they are the genuine and necessary Offspring of Anger indulged and gratified (OM1.4.5.97, 481).

Despite the degree of determination external to the will that human beings must contend with in everyday life due to their mechanical frame, Hartley maintains that improvement can – and must – be made, primarily through reasoning and practice. First, when the

chain of causes is sufficiently examined, the victim of violence will often conclude that the person responsible for their suffering is also acting 'under the influence of other Causes'. While blame towards the tormentor is appropriate, cruelty is not (OM1.4.5.97, 480). Second, considering that revenge is a natural consequence of anger, and that anger gratified by revenge fosters a habit of cruelty, one must cultivate habits of benevolence to interrupt this vicious spiral. To that end, Hartley recommends various forms of active practice aimed at becoming virtous by changing our associations of ideas and the affections they carry.

The triadic law of habit, as derived from the description of mental life in the first section of this paper, serves as the theoretical backbone of Hartley's account of moral progress. It supports what he calls the 'Rule of Life' – a dynamic, self-improving product of human reason that possesses the moral authority to (re)direct the natural course of affections.

> Some Degree of Spirituality is the necessary Consequence of passing through Life. The sensible Pleasures and Pains must be transferred by Association more and more every Day, upon things that afford neither sensible Pleasure nor sensible Pain in themselves, and so beget the intellectual Pleasures and Pains. (OM1.1.2.14 Cor. 8, 82)

Hartley's synoptic overview of moral development starts with bodily sensation, on which mutually dependent layers are added in this order: imagination, ambition, rational self-interest, sympathy, theopathy (feelings towards God) and, finally, moral sense (OM1.3.3.89, 368-9). Necessary spiritual progress, however, meets with obstacles of all kinds. To help nature, Hartley provides and justifies, in the second part of his *Observations on Man*, practical rules concerning a variety of topics, including diet, social intercourse, arts, science, and religion (OM2.3.2-3, 6-7). He derives these rules from scientific observations, common sense, and biblical teachings. At the same time, this series of developmental stages and their effect on behavior remains explainable only by his triadic law of habit. Hartley thus insists on pluralist approach to understanding the world: the subjective account of personal experience, the knowledge derived scientific observations and conversations, the testimony of historians, and the Holy Scripture.

Intentional development of moral sensibility – the highest degree of moral progress – thus requires working on both habits and associations of ideas. Can we change a habit just by altering our associations of ideas? Hartley does not have an elaborate theoretical framework to address this question. However, if we examine his sources, a distinction between habit and associations

of ideas does emerge. The 'double law of habit' introduced by Bishop Joseph Butler (whom Hartley mentions in the second part of his *Observations* – OM2.2.28,145) stipulates that repetition decreases feeling or sensation while increasing a propensity to act towards a goal (Butler 1897 ch. 5 §8 92-93). Alongside this, the law of association presented by Locke (whom Hartley mentions in OM1.1, 5; OM1.1.2.10, 65) holds that repeated or intense conjunction of two mental states binds them together, so that when one is suggested, the other follows automatically (Locke 1975, 2.33, 394-401). The law of association thus accounts for the acquired readiness or ease in transitioning from one bit of mental content to another, including will and action. It bypasses the issues of fluctuating sensations and goal-directed behaviour.

Hartley does not emphasize any distinction between association and habit; in the opening of the *Observations*, he even uses both words synonymously (OM1, 5-6). Nevertheless, there are reasons to argue that the two concepts are not reducible to each other, and this distinction becomes significant in the context of intentional moral development. In Hartley's system, the association of ideas is a theory primarily aimed at explaining psychological – and, to some extent, physiological – phenomena while focusing on relatively small bits of content (OM1.1.2). Habit, on the other hand, though not explicitly thematized by Hartley, refers to a broader array of established patterns in an individual's behaviour and character, including their customary way of reasoning and speaking. Relatedly, Hartley notes that associations of ideas can arise by chance and be dissolved immediately – for example, during dreams – whereas habit settles through repeated action and becomes integrated into a person's character over time. Habit, therefore, may require more vibratory motion to change than association. In other words, one may see habit as a 'mental trait', and association of ideas as a 'mental state'. At the same time, association and transfer play a determining role in the formation of habit, and their refinement is the focus of Hartley's practices of prayer and meditation.

Exiting the unattended 'auto-pilot' mode of living – and its potential escalations – sometimes requires a misfortune, after which we begin paying attention to aspects of our life that need improvement for us to feel better. For awareness to lead to action and change, habits that once went unnoticed must give way to intentional, thoughtful practice. There are many reasons why practice may be understood as a species of habit (Carlisle 2017). One important difference, in the present context, between habit and practice is that habit – understood as a settled form of association – can be explained purely in mechanical terms, as a material residue of previous practice. Practice, however, is primarily intentional; it carries affection, and the feelings infused in it intensify with repetition.

The *Prayers and Religious Meditations* privately written by Hartley – between 1733 and 1742, and posthumously published in 1810 – attest that his theory of practice is grounded in a lifestyle of practice. The practices which he advocates in the *Observations* leverage the power of association and transfer, through the vibratory motion of the brain, to generate intellectual states of pleasure or pain that can prompt virtuous action. Alongside the practice of benevolence and charity – which is the main business of the 'Rule of Life' – Hartley claims that we also have a duty to engage in various species of prayers (alone, in family, in church) and to meditate on a fixed schedule (contemplation of nature, examination of our inner sentiments, etc.). The discipline and regularity serve the purpose of repetition, without which new habits cannot form. But the goal of prayer is to cultivate language and nurture 'theopathetic affections' – that is, a genuine conversation and relationship with the divine.

> The Matter of our Prayers must be different according to the State that we are in; for in Prayer we ought always to lay our real Case, whatever it be, before God. (OM2.3.73, 334)

Sometimes "there are internal Sentiments and Combinations of these, to which no Words can correspond"; in this case Hartley recommends 'mental Prayer' or the "Tendency and Aspiration of the Heart to God, without Words" (OM2.3.73, 333). When performed with intention, these prayers allow the mind and body to emotionally invest the idea of a Deity, and theopathetic affections in their turn distract the mind from pursuing misleading forms of happiness that may increase a person's normal share of misery. Hartley thus treats meditation and language as active practices, a *locus* of potential intervention where we can redirect the seemingly inexorable course of our lives. Active and repeated practice becomes indispensable to moral development and cannot be reduced to its theoretical aspects.

Connecting to our peers, to nature and to the divine, with or without words, requires practice. Through the cultivation of words and 'aspirations of the heart', unfolding across multiple registers, from scientific observation to religious teachings, and silent, contemplative modes of prayer, Hartley argues that individuals can start to perceive (metaphysical) objects through an inner sense, and develop feelings towards them. Practices such as attentive conversation, the reading of Holy Scripture, public and private prayer, and wordless communion through meditation are all means of de-centering the self, deepening the connection with each other, and developing moral sense. As individuals enter shared and private practices of communication, they open themselves to mutual

understanding, to the point of merging into one extensive body with its own sensibility, as this quote puts it:

> [I]f we suppose a Number of Persons thus making a Progress in pure unmixed Happiness, and capable of expressing their own Feelings, and of understanding those of others, by means of a perfect and adequate Language, they might be like new Senses and Powers of Perception to each other, and both give to and receive from each other Happiness indefinitely. (OM1.3.1.85, 320)

Hartley develops this image in the second part of the *Observations*, where he explains how imperfect benevolence, as long as it exceeds malevolence in a person's character, can benefit this person's small circle of 'Neighbours'. He adds that if this cercle were to extend and include 'every Man as his Friend', and if benevolence would be reciprocated in the same degree of perfection, then all the people involved

> would become, as it were, new Sets of Senses, and perceptive Powers, to each other [...] they would all become *Members of the mystical Body of Christ* [and] Happiness would circulate through this mystical Body without End, so as that each Particle of it would, in due time, arrive at each individual Point, or sentient Being, of the great Whole, that each would *inherit all Things.* (OM2.3.6.68, 287)

Language, whether linguistically articulated or silently embodied, thus becomes a medium not only for communication but for an internalized form of sublimation, where the mind can experience extra-ordinary feelings while remaining incorporated in physical reality. This happiness immanent to life on Earth is, for Hartley, the only genuine happiness human beings can expect, and should thus be their primary pursuit.

4 Conclusion

It has become commonplace in Hartley scholarship to claim that his system is difficult to label. In the context of his account of moral life, we can say that Hartley offers an image of human nature that can be understood as an interplay of mechanism and spirituality. This bidirectional relationship is not merely theoretical; it is shaped by practice and regulated by language. From our examination of his account of moral development, in both its theoretical and practical dimensions, two effects of practice can be highlighted: cognitive content and super-empirical reality.

(1) The word referring to a metaphysical entity – for instance, the word 'Deity' – can be misunderstood or misinterpreted in the absence of the practice through which affection is intentionally transferred onto that metaphysical entity. Thus, 'the Deity' may evoke different feelings, and conjure different images or associated words, between a Muslim, an atheist, or a Buddhist, because their practices and rituals differ (Carlisle 2017). Hartley emphasizes the importance of literacy and understanding of common sacred texts, as well as the embodiment of religious practices as the foundation of substantive collective meaning. Within a group, associations of ideas can multiply through sympathy, intensifying the feelings transferred onto an idea of the Deity. This shared idea is a cognitive effect of practice.

(2) Repeated intentional practices – such as private and public prayer, the reading of sacred texts, studying nature, and engaging in meditation at set times – has the power, through association and transfer, to generate intellectual pleasures related to moral ideas. Similarly, genuine conversations and the regular cultivation of language can enrich our experience as social beings, as Hartley illustrates with the figure of a mystical body including the dead, the living, and the unborn, the human and the non-human. These intentional practices thus allow for the development of new senses and access to a super-empirical reality, beyond the biological and social dimensions traditionally associated to a secular concept of humanity.

Studies in neurotheology assessing the impact of intentional prayer or spiritual practice on the brain suggest that we are wired for spirituality, regardless of any specific doctrinal content (Kyriacou 2018). Reflecting on Hartley's account of moral progress may seem limiting if we focus too narrowly on the specifics of the Christian doctrine and ethics presented in the second part of his *Observations on Man*. For this reason, I have attempted in this paper to emphasize not only the key points of Hartley's theory and practice, but also those that are most generalizable. Against the backdrop of social fragmentation in the modern West, the ritualistic discipline advocated by Hartley resonates – coming full circle – with Han's essay on rituals, where collective feelings and togetherness are set in contrast to senseless cult of the self (Han 2020). It portrays a life path characterized by spiritual progress through self-indifference, rather than the obsessive, often self-exploitative drift seen in the culture of personal development (Leslie 1972).

Abbreviation

OM = Hartley 1749

Bibliography

Butler, J. (1897). *The Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed to the Constitution and Course of Nature*. *I. Of Personal Identity; II. Of the Nature of Virtue, and A Correspondence with Samuel Clarke*. Edited by The Right Won. W.E. Gladstone. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Gay, J. (1732). "Preliminary Dissertation concerning the Fundamental Principle of Virtue or Morality". King, W., *Essay on the Origin of Evil*. 2nd ed. Preface; transl. by E. Law. Cambridge: W. Thurlbourn, xxviii-lvii.

Hartley, D. (1749). *Observations on Man: His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations*. 2 vols. London: Richardson.

Hartley, D. (1810). *Prayers, and Religious Meditations*. Bath: Richard Cruttwell.

Locke, J. (1975). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by P.H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Locke, J. (1996). *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Locke, J., *Some Thoughts Concerning Education and Of the Conduct of the Understanding*. Edited by R.W. Grant; N. Tarcov. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1-161.

Secondary literature

Allen, R.C. (1999). *David Hartley on Human Nature*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Allen, R.C. (2024). "David Hartley". Zalta, E.N.; Nodelman, U. (eds), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/hartley/.

Carlisle, C. (2017). "Habit, Practice, Grace: Towards a Philosophy of Religious Life". Ellis, F. (ed.), *New Models of Religious Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 97-115. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198796732.003.0006.

Dacey, M. (2022). "The Shared Project, but Divergent Views, or the Empiricist Associationists". *Philosophical Psychology*, 37(4), 759-81. https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2022.2060070.

Glassman, R.B.; Buckingham, H.W. (2007). "David Hartley's Neural Vibrations and Psychological Association". *Brain, Mind and Medicine: Essays in the Eighteenth-Century Neuroscience*. New York: Springer, 177-90. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-70967-3_13.

Grosso, M. (2005). "Will Training and Philosophical Practice". *Philosophical Practice* 1(1), 23-32. https://doi.org/10.1080/17428170500061527.

Gruengard, O. (2023). *Philosophy in Philosophical Counseling. Unasked Questions, Open Answers*. London: Lexington Books. https://doi.org/10.5771/9781793649102.

Han, B.C. (2017). *Psychopolitics. Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. Transl. by E. Butler. London; New York: Verso.

Han, B.C. (2020). *The Disappearance of Rituals. A Topology of the Present*. Transl. by D. Steuer. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Han, B.C. (2021). *The Palliative Society: Pain Today*. Transl. by D. Steuer. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Kyriacou, D. (2018). "Are we Wired for Spirituality? An Investigation into the Claims of Neurotheology". *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies*, 74(3). https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.4973.

Leslie, M. (1972). "Mysticism Misunderstood: David Hartley and the Idea of Progress". *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 33(4), 625-32. https://doi.org/10.2307/2708861.

Schatzki, T.R.; Cetina, K.K.; von Savigny, E. (eds) (2001). *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. London; New York: Routledge.

Viola, M.; Zanin, E. (2017). "The Standard Ontological Framework of Cognitive Neuroscience: Some Lessons from Broca's Area". *Philosophical Psychology*, 30(7), 945-69. https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2017.1322193.

e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA
Vol. 6 — Num. 2 — December 2025

Rethinking the Double Law of Habit with Maine de Biran

Marco Piazza
Università Roma Tre, Italy

Abstract The history and the prehistory of the 'double law of habit' (DLH) is here reconstructed, from its first formulation like 'law of habit' with Joseph Butler (1736) to what is commonly considered its richest version, with Félix Ravaisson (1838), passing through its main intermediate stages (from Turnbull to Maine de Biran). The richness of the Maine de Biran's DLH version will be shown, which, in its identification of three kinds of habits – of sensibility, judgement and imagination – provides a more convincing model than that of Ravaisson. It is also suggested to reread the DLH in the light of the limitations indicated by Ricœur a century later.

Keywords Double law of habit. Law of habit. Maine de Biran. Ravaisson. Ricœur.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-04-23
Accepted 2025-10-29
Published 2025-12-10

Open access

Citation Piazza, Marco (2025). "Rethinking the Double Law of Habit with Maine de Biran". *JoLMA*, 6(2), 97-116.

DOI 10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2025/02/007

1 Introduction

Ravaisson[1] in his essay *Of Habit* [1838] (2008) uses the expression "double law of habit" (henceforth: DLH) for the first time, alongside the long-established "law of habit" (henceforth: LH), to designate the same conceptual content: repetition weakens the sensation while it strengthens the action, making it quicker and easier ([1838, 13, 9] 2008, 37; 31). The DLH would thus be nothing more than a further reproposal of the LH (Sinclair 2019; Wright, Tabb 2023). The first formulation of the content of the LH is identified by scholars in the work of Joseph Butler (1736), while the first occurrence of the expression 'law of habit', associated with this content, is encountered in the George Turnbull's work [1740] (2005) (Wright 1994; 2011; Wright, Tabb 2023).

It is generally agreed that Ravaisson's reformulation is the most comprehensive or at least the most mature compared to his English and French predecessors, not least by virtue of the gradualism he introduced into the DLH (Carlisle 2010; Sinclair 2019), albeit deriving closely from the theorisations contained in Maine de Biran's essay *The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking* (Maine de Biran 1987; Carlisle, Sinclair 2008, 8) edited in 1802 (henceforth: SM), but preceded by an earlier version from 1801 that remained unpublished for a long time (henceforth: PM). A careful analysis of Biran's essay can, however, show that his formulations are just as rich and complex as Ravaisson's, so much so that one can rightly consider Biran's LH in all respects a DLH on a par with Ravaisson's. Furthermore, a careful analysis of Maine de Biran's essay reveals that the DLH presented there applies to a triad of faculties: sensibility, judgement and imagination. This implies the introduction of a model that is more complex not only than those elaborated by its predecessors, but even than Ravaisson's, overturning the interpretation that has prevailed until now. Finally, the Biranian formulation of the DLH integrated with Ricoeur's corrections to Ravaisson' s theory seems better suited to respond to certain objections that could be made to the Ravaissonian DLH, as we will try to show in the conclusions.

1 This paper is the product of a research conducted as part of the PRIN 2022 project "Habits in (Time of) Crisis (HiToC). Conceptual Tools for Dealing with Disruptive Events" funded by European Union – Next-GenerationEU – The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) – MISSION 4, SECOND INTERVENTION AREA, INVESTIMENTO 1.1 Fondo per il Programma Nazionale di Ricerca e Progetti di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale (PRIN), CUP: F53D23007330006.

2 The DLH Prehistory

Before tackling the comparison between Ravaisson's and Maine de Biran's formulation of the DLH, it is useful to recall the historical-theoretical stages that precede them, so as to be able to highlight more clearly the original contribution that the two philosophers made around this issue. There is a consensus among scholars (i.e.: Wright 1994; 2011; Carlisle 2010; 2014) in indicating as the first emergence of the theoretical core of LH the work *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1736) by the English 'pastoral philosopher' Joseph Butler (1692-1752). There Butler states that both bodily habits and mental habits are formed in human beings: the former are produced by external causes, the latter by internal causes, i.e. by the exercise of the principles of the mind:

> Under the former are comprehended all bodily Activities or Motions, whether graceful or unbecoming, which are owing to Use: Under the latter, general Habits of Life and Conduct. (Butler 1736, 82)

It follows from this that "there are habits of perception, and habits of action": the former are "passive Habits", the latter "active Habits" (Butler 1736, 82). Butler explains:

> It may be hard, to explain throughout its several Parts; and to trace up the Faculty by which we are capable of Habits to its Original, to as to distinguish it from all others in our Mind: And it seems as if contrary Effects were to be ascribed to it. But the thing in general, that our Nature is formed to yield, in some such Manner as this, to Use and Exercise, is Matter of certain Experience. (Butler 1736, 85)

Passive habits weaken with repetition, while active ones strengthen with it:

> from our very Faculty of Habits, passive Impressions, by being repeated, grow weaker. (Butler 1736, 83)

In other words, repetition or exercise has an opposite effect on perception or action:

> by accustoming ourselves to any Course of Action, we get an Aptness to go on, a Facility, Readiness, and often Pleasure, in it. The Inclinations which rendered us averse to it, grow weaker; the Difficulties in it, not only the imaginary but the real ones, lessen; the Reasons for it, offer themselves of course to our Thoughts upon all Occasions; and the least Glimpse of them is sufficient to make us go on, in a Course of Action, to which we have been accustomed.

(Butler 1736, 83)

That we need to take into account is the correlation between the two processes, as in the case of sight (physiological domain), where visual perceptions are imperceptibly replaced by judgements, allowing us to easily establish magnitudes and distances, or in the case of morality (ethical domain), where the pity that follows the perception of others' misfortunes diminishes with repeated exposure to this perception, as a passive trait, while the disposition to help others (benevolence) increases, as an active trait (cf. Butler 1736, 84).

A few years later, in 1739 to be precise, David Hume took up Butler's formulation in the first book of *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Here he explicitly pays homage to Butler (whom he describes as an "eminent philosopher": Hume [1739-40] 2000, 272) and accords LH with neurophysiology based on the doctrine of animal spirits (which has Hellenistic roots), in the version taken up in philosophy by Descartes (posthumously: 1662-64, but developed since the 1630s) and Malebranche (1674-75), and in the same years also in medicine, as with Thomas Willis (cf. *Pathologiae Cerebri* of 1667 and *De Anima Brutorum* of 1672) (Sepper 2015).

It should be noted that William Harvey (1578-1657) had already rejected the theory of animal spirits around the middle of the 17th century (1649). The vitalist physician of the Montpellier school, Théophile de Bordeu, also argued against the existence of animal spirits in his 1742 medical thesis, *De sensu generice considerato*, perhaps influenced by Voltaire's scepticism on the subject (Wolfe 2018, 99). Despite that, many philosophers and physicians continued to consider the theory of animal spirits valid until the 19th century to explain vital and intellectual functions (Rusu 2022).

In the *Treatise*, although neither the expression 'law of habit(s)' nor 'double law of habit(s)' is encountered, it is the theoretical core of the LH that is revived, in accordance with neurophysiological doctrine: the ease gradually produced by repetition corresponds to a greater fluidity of the animal spirits in the nervous system. This ease, regulated by habit, with the gradual disappearance of the novelty of the stimulus and emotion, subtracts strength from passive habits, making the movement of the corresponding animal spirits languid, while on the contrary it gives strength to active habits, because the inclination of the spirit, through repetition, determines their orderly and ready movement according to neuronal pathways made more fluid and easier by repetition itself:

> The facility takes off from the force of the passive habits by rendering the motion of the spirits faint and languid. But as in the active, the spirits are sufficiently supported of themselves, the tendency of the mind gives them new force, and bends them more

> strongly to the action. (Hume [1739-40] 2000, 272)

The orderly movement of animal spirits in active habits is accompanied by a pleasant or agreeable affection

> which will sometimes be so powerful as even to convert pain into pleasure, and give us a relish in time for what at first was most harsh and disagreeable. (Hume [1739-40] 2000, 271)

But the opposite is also true: when the facility is of a very high degree, pleasure can turn into pain:

> as facility converts pain into pleasure, so it often converts pleasure into pain, when it is too great, and renders the actions of the mind so faint and languid, that they are no longer able to interest and support it. (Hume [1739-40] 2000, 271)

In 1740, in *The Principles of Moral Philosophy*, George Turnbull (1698-1748) dwells at length on habit and custom using both the expression "law of habit" (Turnbull [1740] 2005, 29; 137; 140) and (more often) the expression "law of habits" (Turnbull [1740] 2005, 39; 135-40; 173; 221; 304; 329), describing it in the same terms as Butler, whom he calls an "excellent author" (Turnbull [1740] 2005, 137). From what Turnbull writes, it must be concluded that the expression 'law of habits' was already in use, although we have not been able to go back further to his writings:

> It is in consequence of a propension to do, and a facility and readiness in doing**,** acquired by repeated exercise called the *Law of habits*, that we have memory and habitual knowledge, learn languages with tolerable ease, attain to grace of body, as in dancing; to a good ear in music, a good eye in painting or architecture, and a good taste of any ingenious composition, as in oratory or poetry. (Turnbull [1740] 2005, 133-4)

Even in *The Principles of Moral Philosophy*, Turnbull introduces the expression "law of custom" to designate a principle that would account for both the association of ideas and the formation of habits:

> Those effects called the association of ideas and formation of habits, do therefore resolve themselves into the same general law or principle in our nature, which may be called the *law of custom*. (Turnbull 2005, 120)

One would think that the Scot Turnbull had just read the first book of the *Treatise* by his compatriot Hume!

If we move to the French area, we must wait until the end of the century to encounter similar formulations of LH. The first, in order of appearance, is the one included in a *mémoire* read by the medical philosopher Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis on 24 August 1796, but first published in 1798 and included in his *Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme* four years later:

> It is a constant law of animate nature that the frequent return of impressions makes them more distinct, that the repetition of movements makes them easier and more precise. The senses are cultivated by exercise, and the empire of habit makes itself felt before it manifests itself in the motor organs. But it is a law no less constant and no less general that impressions which are too vivid, too often repeated, or too numerous are weakened by the direct effect of these latter circumstances. (Cabanis [1798, 195] 1802, 215)

Xavier Bichat (1771-1802), considered to be the founder of histology, i.e. the study of tissues – although some studies greatly diminish the novelty of his contribution to the history of this branch of medicine (Keel 2001) interesting proposals have been recently made for a re-reading of Bichat's medical conception, showing its innovative aspects and its aim of overcoming both vitalism and mechanism (Bottaccioli 2008; Perdicoyianni-Paleologou 2024) –, in his *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort* (1800) he does not use the expression 'law of habit(s)' or similar, but proposes a LH's formulation that was very successful and would be taken up by Comte and Ravaisson. After having circumscribed the phenomenon of habit to the sphere of the "animal life" of our organism (sensitivity, motility, volition), Bichat clarifies that it acts both on the feelings generated by impressions (which in themselves, as affections, remain unchanged) and on the judgements we make about these feelings (Bichat [1800, 47] 1827, 46). This phenomenon manifests itself, however,

> in an inverse way […]: feeling is constantly weakened by it (habit), judgement on the contrary owes it its perfection. (Bichat [1800, 47-8] 1827, 46)

The example is very clear:

> The more we regard an object, the less sensitive we are to what is unpleasant or pleasant in it, and the more we judge all its attributes. (Bichat [1800, 48] 1827, 46)

It is a phenomenon that is functional to our own learning process and the development of our knowledge and skills:

> by weakening little by little the impressions that at first hold the child's entire attention, habit enables him to seize the particular attributes of bodies, and teaches him to see, to hear, to smell, to taste and to touch, subsequently makes him pass in each sensation from confused notions of the whole to precise ideas of details. (Bichat [1800, 55] 1827, 52)

In 1801, in the first volume of his *Eléments d'Idéologie*, Destutt de Tracy dwells on the effects produced in us by the frequent repetition of the same acts and illustrates a "general law (*loi générale*) of all our movements", which he describes as follows:

> The more they are repeated, the easier and faster they become, and […] the easier and faster they are, the less perceptible they become, i.e. the more the perception they provoke in us diminishes, until it is cancelled out, even if the movement continues to take place. (Tracy 1801, 226-7)

3 The Biranian Double Law

Compared to the formulations of the LH reported so far, more complex and articulate is undoubtedly the treatment of it contained in the two versions of the *mémoire* dedicated by Maine de Biran to the question of the influence of habit on thought (1801 and 1802), the second of which was awarded in a competition organised by the Classe des sciences morales et politiques of the Institut de France. The topic had been proposed in 1799 by Cabanis and Destutt de Tracy on the basis of the circulation of Bichat's ideas, even before the publication of the latter's *Recherches*. The competition had been re-bid after no memoir submitted in the first edition, including Biran's, had been selected for the award. Hence the origin of the two versions of Biran's *mémoire*, the second of which the author was forced to publish, unwillingly according to his style, so as not to have the honour he had earned withdrawn.

For his research on habit, Biran – who does not appear to have read works of philosophy written in this language directly in English – did not have at his disposal most of the sources we have mentioned above. Turnbull does not appear to have been translated into French, while Butler's *Analogy* is only translated into this language in 1821 and Hume's *Treatise* in its complete form will only be translated in 1878. Biran did not even have access to Bichat's text, which he said he read only after he had delivered the manuscript of the second version of his *mémoire* for printing. This does not mean that he could not have had fairly precise knowledge of Hume's theories (although Hume is cited by Biran essentially only for his theory of causality: Piazza 2005), while he certainly had knowledge of the above-mentioned works by

Cabanis (from the time of the first drafts of his *mémoire*) as evidenced by the references to them in his texts (PM 11-2; 21; SM 154 note), while he only had access to Tracy's *Eléments d'Idéologie* when his memoir "was almost completely finished" (SM 135 note).

His interest in the subject of habit is part of Biran's broader interest in the relationship between mind and body, in terms of understanding the physiological states that do or do not favor our activity and what strategies can be used to counteract the negative effects, in terms of passivity, due to states and dispositions of our organism that reinforce a melancholic and lazy temperament. Habit thus presents itself in Biran's eyes as a bridge between the physical and the moral and must be studied jointly by medicine and metaphysics, or physiology and psychology.

Habit is therefore a phenomenon that lays bare the complexity and duplicity of our being, which, through its reflexive capacities, can try to curb its negative aspects.

Biran bases his theory on the distinction between sensation and perception, one passive, the other active. It is a distinction of nature and not of degree: active impression (perception) is always accompanied by voluntary effort and is a movement associated with consciousness, whereas passive impression (sensation) is a mere sensation and is not accompanied by consciousness.

The duplicity of impressions corresponds to that of their determinations, i.e. their effects in the senses or motor centres. The active impression, through the repetition that facilitates it, gives rise to reminiscences and ideas, whereas the passive impression is weakened by repetition and remains excluded from the field of consciousness because the judgement of personality – i.e. self-awareness or apperception of self – in the sentient subject is not associated with it.

> This fugacity, this degradation of all sensorial effects, thus seems to be a law of habit (*loi de l'habitude*) as constant and general as that of the increasing rapidity and easiness of the products of our motor force; and applying these two laws together (*ces deux lois reunies*) to all the interior phenomena that reflection discovers in us, there seems to be not one that cannot serve as proof and confirmation of them. (SM 203)

The expression "seems to be" should be emphasised, to be taken seriously in its dubitative value, because we will see shortly afterwards that there are indeed phenomena that for Biran escape the DLH as he formulates it here, without, however, completely undermining the bipolar model of the law.

The effect of DLH is fundamentally problematic on the passive habits level, since these have important physiological repercussions

and in terms of inner sensitivity they change the natural tone of our organs. The inner impressions from which they originate thus tend to be converted into habits of temperament and thus affect our feeling of existence, which they make sad or pleasant, ceasing

> to be felt in themselves, but are lost and confused in the multitude of vague impressions that combine to form this intimate and habitual feeling of our passive existence. (SM 169)

Thus, is formed, according to Biran, a callousness of our sensitivity that has potentially fatal characters.

In correlation, on the other hand, with the perceptive faculty and motor determinations, the weakening of sensations makes the impressions on which they are based available to be perceived, while the movements of the organs on which these impressions depend become easier and more precise.

From this point of view, DLH seems to give rise to exclusively positive effects:

> Such is the great law of habit, of operations, of movements without number associated with each other, which have become extremely prompt and easy; weakening and disappearance of effort, insensitivity in the action, clarity and precision in its result. (SM 187)

In other words:

> In the same manner, therefore, as effort is nil or insensible in visual perception, it will also be nil or insensible in the production of the corresponding ideas or images; these images will arise spontaneously in the organ of thought, will follow one another there with the greatest rapidity, will shine there with the brightest brilliance, will disappear only to reappear again, and this without the individual's will seeming to participate in any way. (SM 151)

DLH presents, however, a dual process associated with the weakening of sensation and the refinement of action or judgement: on the one hand the production of a need, on the other that of an automatic spontaneity, thus suggesting a principle of activity at work in passive habits and a principle of passivity in active ones. This is how Biran describes the first of these processes:

> While the repeated sensation weakens in any organ or eccentric part immediately excited, the sensory principle, or system, may retain its determination, tend to carry it out at the accustomed (*accoutumés*) intervals, demand the same motives for irritation, become exasperated at their absence... Hence the desire (*désir*),

> product of the instinct of the organs, which gives laws to the will without receiving any, and could take place without will, without movement, without power. This is how sensations, while weakened by habit (*habitude*), become imperious needs (*besoins*). (SM 284-5)

While this is how the second process is presented, on which much of Biran's focus is on the phenomenon of habit, in its conditioning of mental acts originally produced consciously and intentionally:

> When the perceptive faculty has reached this degree of perfection on the one hand, of blindness in its exercise on the other, the individual thus remains passively surrendered to the impulse of external causes, which often move him without his being aware of it, or to organic dispositions, to involuntary outbursts of sensibility, to the periodic revival of the same needs, which momentarily awaken him from his lethargy only to plunge him back into it the next instant; circumscribed in a circle of operations that are always repeated in the same way, he performs them without thinking about them, with distraction and as if in a sort of somnambulism. If there is in him a capacity for reflection, a power to react on everything around him and to modify himself, this power is masked by habit (*habitude*), by the facility and spontaneity of the primary movements, or natural signs, on which he is based. (SM 216-7)

The weakening of sensations makes the impressions derived from them available for perception, while the movements of the organs on which these impressions depend become easier and more precise. With repetition, however, the impression of effort and the activity of consciousness weaken, although "its initial results do not follow the same law of degradation" (SM 151): the result is that their active character is nullified at the level of individual self-perception (hence the error of confusing perceptions with the sensations from which they derive), to the point of generating automatic movements that we interpret as instinctive.

Paraphrasing Biran, let us think of the judgement with which we recognise a familiar object: the ease with which the repetition of its perception has generated is of great help in freeing mental energies that we can turn to something else, but in such indifference error can insinuate itself because automatic recognition bypasses conscious judgement and we can easily fail to realise that that object has changed or been replaced.

This risk is evident to Biran when he takes an in-depth look at the effects of habit on the intellectual faculty. And he sees the risk of too precipitously conversion into reminiscences of the reflexive

judgements that underlie the primitive association between signs and ideas.

When we use linguistic signs to express our thoughts we are dealing with memory signs, which we voluntarily associate with ideas understood as perceptions of which we are aware in our minds. These memory signs, which are then linguistic signs, by effect of habit tend to become signs of the imagination, i.e. they tend to lose their figurative character (which makes them conventional signs, which stand for...) to assume a character of their own.

The result is the indication of a real model of life to be made one's own, which is based on the commitment to escape the empire of habit over our mind, acting in a very specific direction:

> In order to move from the virtual to the effective, the individual must be determined to repeat with intention everything he has done before by habit; he must go back to the origin of his signs, untangle their functions, institute them anew by an act of his will, associate them fixedly, and by a series of (reflected) repetitions, with all the impressions of his senses, all the products of his thought, everything he perceives, everything he feels inside and outside himself. This opens up an indefinite career for perfectibility. (SM 217)

Since there is a tendency for our sensibility to associate images and feelings with ideas and the signs that express them, habit contributes to making these associations obstinate and generating prejudices that are often inculcated through education. The philosopher is the one who examines the words fixed by habit and with difficulty tries to dissociate the first products of the sensory memory from the ideas, restoring the terms to their original function.

> The articulated sign and the visible or tangible object, for example, to which this sign is attached, are two equally distinct perceptions, equally fixed and available; the motor force can divide itself between these two terms, enveloping them in the same act without there being any sensory disturbance that stops or distracts its deployment. The same exercise can be continued or repeated, according to the will of the individual […]. Henceforth the presence of the object will determine the recall of the sign, and this recall will provoke the appearance of the image. The function is common and reciprocal; recall is facilitated by the familiarity of perception, and representation by the frequency of voluntary recall. Memory, relying here equally on the sign that leads to the idea and on the object that leads back to the sign, will thus have a double motive; its habits will also acquire a double persistence. Finally (and this inestimable advantage is exclusively attached to the class of our

> perceptible impressions) the fixity of the image corresponds to that of the available articulated sign or to the permanence of the written, drawn, etc. sign, as the constant value of this sign in turn rests on the invariability of the object it represents; there are no illusions, enchantment or mechanical habits here. (SM 274-5)

The Biran's method aims to forms "the tempered temperament of the thought" (*le tempérament tempéré de la pensée*) (SM 254), i.e. a way of being and thinking that never settles into passivity and aims to practise the habit of constantly subjecting to scrutiny all judgements that assume a habitual, unreflective character:

> The levers of the mind are like the levers of the body; they help us, but sometimes too much, by preventing the development of our natural powers. So, as soon as they abandon us, we are left helpless, with all the weakness that comes from their habitual use. All this brings us back to the method and means indicated [...] for developing good habits of memory, for forming and maintaining the right temperament, the right balance of mental powers. Exercising (by appropriate means) all these powers, but gradually, and without ever exceeding them: making a habit, a need, of the clear representation of ideas, and of linking them to signs: protecting ourselves from the training of words, and from purely mechanical forms: these are the first conditions that a method should fulfil, in order to achieve the proposed aim. (SM 279-80)

The analytical exposition of the DLH thus proves useful in introducing correctives to the uncontrolled power of habit, the ambiguity of which is strongly emphasised by Biran, in this not at all original compared to a long tradition to which he makes only a few rare mentions in his dense description.

4 The Double Law for Ravaisson

Let us now turn to the best-known formulation of the DLH, the one that is even considered canonical, namely the DLH presented by Félix Ravaisson (1813-1900) in his 1838 doctoral thesis entitled *De l'habitude* (2008), drawing on the theories of Bichat, Destutt de Tracy, Maine de Biran, Butler (whose *Analogy*, as anticipated, had been translated in 1821) and at the same time blending elements from his direct meditation on the works of Aristotle, the French vitalist medical tradition and the German idealism of Schelling. Ravaisson, among his sources, also cites the French translation of the first volume of Dugald Stewart's *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1792), which appeared in 1808. It should be noted that here the English expression "these two laws of our nature" (1792, 536)

referring to habits is translated "cette double loi" (1808, II, 392) in abbreviated form.

Ravaisson starts from an Aristotelian premise: every entity possesses a specific way of being (*hexis* or *habitus*) and its "fundamental character" is "the tendency to persist in its way of being" ([1838, 5] 2008, 27). Habitus is that "force" (Ravaisson [1838, 38] 2008, 57) by which an intimate continuity is established between organic nature and the life of the spirit, and between the life of the spirit and the life of God itself.

Whereas Maine de Biran maintained a dualism between the physical and the mental, while recognising the complexity of their relationship, in Ravaisson we encounter a kind of metaphysical monism. And whereas for Maine de Biran habit is synonymous with the weakening of consciousness and reflection – and thus contains within itself the risk of prejudice and the scleroticisation of language and thought –, for Ravaisson it is always the effect of an inclination that follows the will, an inclination aimed at a purpose and thus a trace of intelligence.

In his "highly regarded thesis", as Léon Dumont defines it some forty years later ([1876] 2019, 50), Ravaisson mainly serves the more usual and simple expression "law of habit", in one case recalling the adjective "general" already used by Cabanis and Tracy to refer precisely to the DLH:

> Receptivity diminishes and spontaneity increases. Such is the general law of the disposition, of the habit, that the continuity or the repetition of change seems to engender in every living being. (Ravaisson [1838, 9] 2008, 31)

> The law of habit can be explained only by the development of a Spontaneity that is at once active and passive, equally opposed to mechanical Fatality and to reflective Freedom. (Ravaisson [1838, 28] 2008, 55)

> Ultimately, even in the sphere of the pure understanding and of abstract reason, the law of habit is still to be found, and consequently also the principle of this law, namely natural spontaneity. (Ravaisson [1838, 43] 2008, 71)

In fact, only two occurrences of the expression associated with DLH appear in the entire dissertation, and both are contained in the same sentence:

> The double law of the contrary influence on beings of the duration of change, depending on whether the being merely suffers the change or sets it off – that is, the double law of habit – must manifest

> itself here by more apparent and incontestable characteristics. (Ravaisson [1838, 13] 2008, 37)

Incidentally, on closer inspection, the 'standard' formulation of the Ravaissonian DLH is taken from a passage in which neither the expression 'double law' nor the more prevalent 'law' appears:

> Thus everywhere, in every circumstance, continuity or repetition – that is, duration – weakens passivity and excites activity. (Ravaisson [1838, 25] 2008, 49)

Beyond this, the originality of Ravaisson's philosophy of habit is evident: habit is a kind of operator linking nature and spirit, and its action in the human being develops as if along a spectrum, from a maximum of sensitivity to which corresponds a minimum of activity, to a maximum of perception to which corresponds a minimum of passivity. Unlike Biran, where the perspective is decidedly horizontal, here it becomes vertical: in proceeding from nature to spirit, according to an ascending path, albeit a reversible one, insofar as it is possible to follow the reverse path to understand the abysses of instinct in which our very nature is rooted.

But if the Ravaissonian philosophy of habit is decidedly original, due to its metaphysical 'turn' and its embracing of the entire world of life, from the simplest forms of the plant kingdom to the most complex forms of the human species, his conception of DLH is not so original. In what is considered to be the distinctive contribution of his formulation compared to previous ones, Ravaisson actually does nothing more than repeat what Biran has already illustrated. That is, that even where passive sensitivity prevails, there is a "desire" (Ravaisson [1838, 27] 2008, 53), a "need" (Ravaisson [1838, 41] 2008, 69) that contains a principle of activity, even if not thinking. And where active perception prevails, there is a principle of passivity, an automatism that introduces irreflexivity into spontaneity.

That is, Ravaisson argues – just as clearly as Biran – that there is an active aspect in the passive pole of sensibility and a passive aspect in the active pole of action and judgement. This means that habit produces, on the one hand, "a stronger willing in the absence of will" and, on the other hand, "a weaker passivity in the absence of resistance to this passivity" (Vincenti 2019, 107-8). But it is precisely at the heart of this conception, which structurally mimics the one already exposed by Biran, that a new trait is concealed, one that tends to dissolve the dualism on which the DLH is based: it is the unifying element between passivity and activity constituted by what Ravaisson calls an "obscure activity" (*activité obscure*) (Ravaisson [1838, 26] 2008, 51), for which Ravaisson himself refers to Thomas Reid (Ravaisson [1838, 26 note 1] 2008, 51 note 27). Obscure activity

thus becomes a bridge between passivity and activity, a unifying principle that is at one with Ravaisson's positive evaluation of this phenomenon, which governs our lives and, more generally, the entire lifeworld, marking a profound break with the Biranian model (Carlisle, Sinclair 2008, 11).

The Ravaissonian model is, in fact, a circular one: habit brings the effort and freedom of our acting back into a pre-intellectual and pre-voluntary dimension, and at the same time makes this natural dimension the very source from which every intellectual and voluntary act springs. Just as an idea firmly rooted in our minds becomes a spontaneous habit, so an "unreflective and indistinct idea" (Ravaisson [1838, 45] 2008, 73) precedes and anticipates "the distinct idea that reflection searches out" (Ravaisson [1838, 45] 2008, 73). A circularity that accords with a gradationalist conception of habit:

> Between the ultimate depths of nature and the highest point of reflective freedom, there are an infinite number of degrees measuring the development of one and the same power, and as one rises through them, extension – the condition of knowledge – increases with the distinction and the interval of the opposites. This is like a spiral whose principle resides in the depths of nature, and yet which ultimately flourishes in consciousness. (Ravaisson [1838, 47] 2008, 77)

This model comes to coincide with the condition of normality of the living and of existence, in a kind of metaphysical teleologism within which even the pathological has its own function above the destiny of individuals:

> In the same way [with respect to the principle of the law of habit], would this not be the secret of the transmission of illness itself, of the substantial idea of illness, which bides its time in order to become in the son what it was in the father, and which is propagated with its forms and its immutable periods from generation to generation? (Ravaisson [1838, 37] 2008, 65)

What is certain is that when action becomes freer and faster as a result of habit, it becomes an inclination that replaces deliberative power, and that "even escapes entirely and irremediably both will and consciousness" (Ravaisson [1838, 25] 2008, 51). Hence the movements

> more or less voluntary, that gradually degenerate into convulsive ones, which we call *tics*. (Ravaisson [1838, 25] 2008, 51)

This is Ravaisson's only concession to the risk of passive automatism that so worried Biran and that in the 20th century would become

almost the only ground reserved for habit by behaviourism, after the double polemical reaction to spiritualism and Lamarckism had almost completely drowned the philosophy of habit in France, relegating the study of habitual behaviour to experimental psychology (Kaufmann 2011, 108-14).

5 Conclusions

We intend, in conclusion, to take a step backwards and one forwards. The backward one is a temporary return to Biran, the forward one a leap to Ricœur. But let us proceed with the first.

Biran, as is well known, builds the DLH on the distinction, fundamental for him, between "sensations" and "perceptions": the former passive, the latter active. And yet, in his *mémoire*, he makes it clear that there are not only habits linked to sensation or perception: there are also those linked to the imagination and the passions. It is precisely these that constitute an exception to DLH (or a suspension of it):

> How is it, however, that certain feelings acquire a liveliness, a singular energy while the ideas likely to excite them are more frequently reproduced? How is it that these ideas themselves retain all their brilliance and sometimes become more attractive through their repetition? Why do they suddenly regain their ascendancy, after having lost it through familiarity? (SM 203)

These images thus constitute a third class of habits: they are habits associated either with ideas produced by the imagination (illusions, superstitions, beliefs, errors) and founded in fear or in passions generated by desires, fears, hopes, obstacles to be overcome, ideas of power.

Instead of weakening, these images with repetition produce a need that increases the power of the imagination. And, as phantasmatic, they generally do not lose their power, because the illusions on which they are based ceaselessly feed the feelings, desires and hopes associated with them:

> Habit, in all these cases, far from withering the imagination, on the contrary, makes the same motives for activity more dear to it: it fixes it stubbornly in the same direction, and rivets the iron plates that keep it enslaved to it. (SM 207)

Only in part do habits of the imagination fall under DLH: in the case where their object is achieved (as in love passion),

> the seductive prism is broken, the charm is destroyed, and habit regains its rights. (SM 207)

In other words, habit in this case weakens its power, according to the "general law of our sensibility" (SM 207-8), as when it "makes […] the same food more insipid" to someone and at the same time "makes it more necessary for him" (SM 208): i.e. DLH comes into action.

But if their object escapes us, we feel pain at its loss:

> The all-too-familiar object that flees from us once again falls entirely under the sway of the imagination: Suddenly stopped in a slope that habit had dug and made so easy, it wakes up, is astonished, is irritated against unexpected resistance, and reacts with all the force of a spring long compressed; it is then that it calls all its impressions, so weak, so languid, gives them new life, transports an illusory charm on the object that is no longer, exaggerates the picture of past happiness, to make the privation more cruel. (SM 208)

Thus, Biran seems to suggest, there would be a difference between the appetite or feeling of need generated by passive habit, which we may be unaware of in deprivation, and the feeling of pain we experience when the object of our love is taken away from us and escapes our craving for possession. This is because in the latter case the image of happiness experienced next to the beloved being is re-actualised and reinvigorated in the corresponding idea, which instead of losing strength regains it.

Not only, therefore, is there a third category of habit for Biran, which Ravaisson seems to have overlooked, but the fact that passive habits for Biran lie outside the realm of consciousness seems to make the reversibility attributed by Ravaisson to habit itself impossible.

It will be Ricœur, more than a century after Ravaisson, who will return to the issue, proposing to make a clear distinction between habit and need, clarifying that it is not habit that creates need, but rather habit offers, in the presence of a need, an easy model of action, a "customary form" that the need tends to acquire in order to be satisfied:

> What we often call force of habit is no more than the tendency of a preexisting need to adopt a customary form which is easiest to satisfy. […] If, then, habit affects need to the point of seeming to invent it, it does so in turn by the encounter of the acquired customary form and latent needs. The latter are always the true sources of need which overflow into quasi-needs. It is never true that habit creates a need—even the most artificial needs, such as needs of tranquilizers and stimulants, always refer to the genuine

> tissue of need in which exercise had worked a kind of derivative bloodletting. (Ricœur [1950, 109-10] 1966, 114-5)

Among other things, Ricœur adds, the habit-need dialectic also includes the conversion into disgust or repulsion of the pleasure associated with need:

> When a need dies out and there is no other need apt to take charge of the habit, the latter seems to us to create no longer a need but a disgust, as for example some obligation – professional or other – constraining us to carry out an action which we regard as beyond the point of saturation of genuine needs sustaining it. (Ricœur [1950, 110] 1966, 115)

That is, Ricœur insists that habit is nothing more than a detector of needs, which, however, can turn into repulsion if the performance of the related task has saturated them:

> All habit can do is to provide an outlet for the sources of action by providing a form for the power which releases it. Thereafter desire, in the determinate sense which it has in ordinary language, is at the same time a conscious form of need, spurred by the emotion of wonder which drives it to act and encouraged by the ease of familiar means. Thus, habit can only reveal needs. Need becomes revulsion when the execution of a task has 'saturated' it. But beyond the contrary affective effects, habit always remains a *practical* rather than an affective spontaneity, offering need an easy action along the lines of a privileged form. (Ricœur [1950, 275] 1966, 291)

If the nature of habit is thus merely practical and not affective, and this would lead one to exclude its capacity to generate desire in the sense that this takes on when understood as emotion, it is Ricœur himself who considers the idea of a 'customary desire' proper to habit admissible, albeit with limitations:

> But only with serious reservations could we speak of a 'customary desire' (*désir-coutume*) characteristic of habit, compared with 'wonder desire' (*désir-surprise*) characteristic of emotion, in order to stress the specific guidance which comes from capacities concealed in structure insofar as they facilitate the initiative which moves them. (Ricœur [1950, 275] 1966, 291-2)

The limitation proposed by Ricœur, as is evident, concerns the facilitating aspects that mark habit, and on this front his position is at the antipodes of Ravaisson's (whom he himself quotes in the

following passage), depriving habit of a whole series of characters that have traditionally been attributed to it:

> What is hidden behind this enigmatic submissiveness of habit which effaces the traces of its own history? Nothing is more impenetrable than the familiar. Ravaisson compares habit with desire: it is "the invasion of the domain of freedom by natural spontaneity." However, it is not true that habit is not only skill, but also a tendency to act (ordinarily we speak of the 'force of habit'). The most neutral terms, 'acquired disposition' or 'tendency,' remove nothing of the equivocity of this habitual spontaneity. (Ricœur [1950, 273] 1966, 289)

By separating habit and will, habit and desire, Ricœur seems to embrace a 'reductionist' version of habit, but, in reality, his reading is more complex, as he considers – against behaviourist psychology – automatism as a degradation of habit (cf. Ricœur [1950, 267-8] 1966, 284), which is to be understood instead as power:

> Habit which can be understood is a power, a capacity to resolve a certain type of problem according to an available schema: I can play the piano, I know how to swim. (Ricœur [1950, 267] 1966, 283)

In the *practical irreflexivity* that marks habit as power we find the key element that holds the DLH together from Butler to Ravaisson via Maine de Biran. But Ricœur's clarifications seem useful to us in order to rethink DLH on this side of Ravaissonian monism: this, in creating a short-circuit between obscure activity and will, tends to resolve DLH itself into a formula that results in a spiritualistic reductionism that today could appear as the other side of the posterior behaviouristic one.

Bibliography

Bichat, X. (1827). *Physiological Researches on Life and Death*. En. transl. by F. Gold. Boston: J.H.A. Frost. Transl. of: *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort*. Paris: Brosson, Gabon & C., an VIII [1800].

Bottaccioli, F. (2008). "Il 'vitalismo' di François Xavier Bichat. Una nuova lettura". *Rivista della Società Italiana di Antropologia Medica*, 21-26, 97-132.

Butler, J. (1736). *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature, to which are added Two brief Dissertations: I. Of Personal Identity, II. Of the Nature of Virtue*. London: J., J. & P. Knapton.

Cabanis, P.-J.-G. (1798). "Suite de l'histoire physiologique des sensations". *Mémoires de l'Institut National des Sciences et Arts pour l'an IV de la République*. Paris: Baudoin, 154-208. Afterwards: "Troisième mémoire". Cabanis, P.-J.-G., *Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme*. T. 1. Paris: Crapart, Caillé & Ravier, 1802, 161-233.

Carlisle, C. (2010). "Between Freedom and Necessity: Félix Ravaisson on Habit and the Moral Life". *Inquiry*, 53(2), 123-45.
Carlisle, C. (2014). *On Habit*. London: Routledge.
Carlisle, C.; Sinclair, M. (2008). "Editor's Introduction". Ravaisson, F., *Of Habit*. En. transl. by C. Carlisle, M. Sinclair. London: Continuum, 1-21.
Destutt de Tracy, A.-L.-C. (1801). *Projet d'éléments d'idéologie. À l'usage des ecoles centrales de la Republique Française*. Paris: P. Didot, F. Didot & Debray.
Dumont, L. [1876] (2019). "De l'habitude". Dumont, L., *De l'habitude et du plaisir*. Ed. by C. Dromelet. Paris: Garnier, 49-99.
Hume, D. [1739-40] (2000). *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Ed. by D.F. Norton, M.J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Kaufmann, J.-C. (2001). *Ego. Pour une sociologie de l'individu*. Paris: Nathan.
Keel, O. (2001). *L'avènement de la médecine clinique modern en Europe. 1750-1815: politiques, institutions et savoirs*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal.
Maine de Biran [1801-1802] (1987). *Mémoires sur l'Influence de l'habitude*. Ed. by G. Romeyer-Dherbey. Maine de Biran, *Oeuvres*. Vol. 2. Ed. by F. Azouvi. Paris: Vrin.
Perdicoyianni-Paleologou, H. (2024). "Xavier Bichat and the Renovation of the Pathological Anatomy". *Journal of Medical Biography*, 32(1), 89-96.
Piazza, M. (2005). "Maine de Biran e l'illuminismo scozzese". Rivista di Storia della Filosofia, 60(1), 23-59.
Ravaisson, F. (2008). *Of Habit*. En. transl. by C. Carlisle, M. Sinclair. London: Continuum. Transl. of.: *De l'habitude*. Paris: H. Fournier & C., 1838.
Ricœur, P. (1966). *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*. En. transl. by E.V. Kohák. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press. Transl. of: *Le volontaire et l'involontaire*. Paris: Aubier, 1950.
Rusu, D. (2022). "Animal Spirits: Bridging Mind and Body in Early Modern Philosophy". Jalobeanu, D., Wolfe, C.T. (eds), *Encyclopedia of Early Modern Philosophy and the Sciences*. Cham: Springer, 65-9.
Sepper, D.L. (2015). "Animal Spirits". Nolan, L. (ed.), *The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 26-8.
Sinclair, M. (2019). *Being Inclined. Felix Ravaisson's Philosophy of Habit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Stewart, D. (1792). *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*. London: A. Strahan & T. Cadell.
Stewart, D. (1808). *Élémens de la philosophie de l'esprit humain*. T. 1. Fr. transl. by P. Prevost. Geneva: J.J. Paschoud.
Turnbull [1740] (2005). *The Principles of Moral and Christian Philosophy. Volume I. The Principles of Moral Philosophy*. Edited and with an Introduction by A. Broadie. Indianapolis: Library Fund.
Vincenti, D. (2019). *La spontaneità malata. Fisiologia, patologia e alienazione mentale nel pensiero di Félix Ravaisson*. Pisa: ETS.
Wolfe, C.T. (2018). "Material-Cerebral Plasticity, Fluid Ontology: The Case of Animal Spirits". *Épistémocritique. Revue de littérature et savoirs*, 95-112.
Wright, J.P. (1994). "Butler and Hume on habit and moral character". Stewart, M.A.; Wright, J.P. (eds), *Hume and Hume's Connexions*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 105-18.
Wright, J.P. (2011). "Ideas of Habit and Custom in Early Modern Philosophy". *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 41(1), 18-32.
Wright, J.P.; Tabb, K. (2023). "Habit and the Association of Ideas in the Scottish Enlightenment". A. Garrett, J.A. Harris (eds), Scottish Philosophy in the Eighteenth Century. Vol. 2, Method, Metaphysics, Mind, Language. Oxford: Oxford Academic, 293-326.

e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA
Vol. 6 — Num. 2 — December 2025

Rethinking the Double Law of Habit: James' Case

Alice Morelli
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy

Abstract In this paper I suggest to rethink the traditional double law of habit as a theoretical development of the co-presence of activity and passivity inherent to the concept of habit. My thesis is twofold: firstly, I will argue that speaking in terms of the double nature of habit is conceptually different from speaking in terms of the double law of habit because recognition of the former does not necessarily entail endorsement of the latter. Secondly, I will argue that the traditional formulation of the double law brings the risk of the dualism between activity and passivity of action, and the dualism between habit and will. In particular, I will look at James' *Principles of Psychology* as a relevant example: I will argue that James conceptualizes the double nature of habit through the notion of plasticity *without* formulating the double law of habit as developed by his predecessors.

Keywords William James. Habit. Double law of habit. Habituation. Joseph Butler.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-02-12
Accepted 2025-04-04
Published 2025-06-20

Open access

Citation Morelli, Alice (2025). "Rethinking the Double Law of Habit: James' Case". *JoLMA*, 6(2), 117-132.

DOI 10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2025/02/005

1 Introduction: From the Double Nature to the Double Law

There[1] seems to be basic agreement on the idea that the concept of habit entails structurally a kind of tension or paradox (Pedwell 2016, 9): on the one hand, the concept conjures the sense of ease and facility of action, that is, a sense of *power*, yet on the other hand it also intrinsically conjures repetition and automatism, that is, a sense of *stasis*. Malabou (2008, VIII) states that habit can be both grace and addiction, Carlisle (2014) explains the duplicity of habit in terms of the ancient *pharmakon*: it is at once a blessing and a curse. Similarly, Portera (2020, 76) conceptualizes the notion of habit by arguing that it is both active and passive in structure, that is to say, it keeps in itself the possibility of mechanization and automatism without being in itself automatism. This ambivalence is internal to habit itself. We can then speak in terms of the double nature of habit. Indeed, even Dewey – who can be considered one of the champions of a positive and rich conceptualization of habit – admits that "all habit involves mechanization" in terms of a mechanism of action which operates spontaneously whenever the cue is given. However, what is important for Dewey is to know that mechanization "is not of necessity *all* there is to habit" (Dewey 2023, 40-41).[2]

Given the widespread recognition of the double nature of habit, philosophers have then developed more theory-laden views on the opposition between the element of activity and the element of passivity inherent to habit itself. Historically, one of the results was the formulation of what Ravaisson (2008) calls "The double law of habit", which was first noted by Joseph Butler in 1736. Butler noticed that when we become accustomed to certain sensations we cease to notice them, while actions become easier and more assured when repeated several times. The double law is then a specific characterization of the principle of habituation but developed – at least in Butler – from the distinction between active and passive habits that, as we will see, is problematic: passive habits – feelings and sensations – lose power

1 This paper is the product of a research conducted as part of the PRIN 2022 project "Habits in (Time of) Crisis (HiToC). Conceptual Tools for Dealing with Disruptive Events" funded by European Union – Next-GenerationEU – The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) – MISSION 4, SECOND INTERVENTION AREA, INVESTIMENTO 1.1 Fondo per il Programma Nazionale di Ricerca e Progetti di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale (PRIN).

2 Indeed, given the double nature of habit, we can read the narrow conceptualizations of habit as stemming from a particular focus placed on just one of the two poles of the duplicity. The negative conception of habit as epitome of inauthenticity, mere mechanism and routine process is an example of this. See Malabou 2008 and Barandiaran, Di Paolo 2014 for an overview of the two basic ways of speaking of habit in the history of philosophy.

by repetition while active habits – actions and movements – gain. This principle cuts across the Aristotelian distinction between habit as *hexis* – an acquired and stable disposition – and habit as *ethos* – the process of habituation by which we acquire particular habits as *hexeis*.

In this paper, I work with the assumption that speaking about the double nature of habit is conceptually different from speaking about the double law of habit, for recognition of the former does not necessarily entail endorsement of the latter. In other words, the passage from the double nature to the double law is not theoretically neutral. Given this, I will argue that from Butler's first formulation of the double law, subsequent formulations assume different senses of activity and passivity in relation to habit and they bring the philosophical risk of two kinds of dualism: dualism between activity and passivity of action, and dualism between habit and will. In particular, I suggest looking at James' conceptualization of habit in his *Principles of Psychology*[3] as a relevant example: I shall argue that James conceptualizes the double nature of habit through the notion of plasticity *without* formulating the double law of habit as developed by his predecessors and without falling into philosophical dualism. To do this, I will first present Butler's double law and some significant subsequent versions with different uses of the concepts of activity and passivity. Secondly, I will focus on James' case by presenting a comparative analysis of three versions of the content of his chapter on habit in his *Principles*, and some remarks on his treatment of sensation in relation to habit.

2 The Double Law of Habit

Scholars working on the philosophy of habit agree in tracing the first occurrence of the principle of the double law in Butler's *The Analogy of Religion* (Butler 1927), although it was Ravaisson who named it and gave it metaphysical thickness in his *Of Habit*.[4] Moreover, the principle was taken and used by other philosophers working with the notion of habit, such as Hume (1896), Bichat (1809), Maine de Biran (1970), Turnbull (1740) and – for some (Carlisle 2014; Piazza 2018) – James (1914) as well. Given this, I have taken Butler's first formulation as a reference point for a comparison with the subsequent formulations of the principle and I have identified at least four different ways in which the concept of passivity is used, to which correspond four

3 Henceforth *Principles*.

4 For an exposition of the genealogy and development of the double law in the history of philosophy see Carlisle 2014; Piazza 2018; Wright 2022.

different ways of talking about the active element of habitual action:

1. 'Passive' as being subject to the process of habituation, being/becoming accustomed, versus "active" as acquiring particular habits, acting in a certain way rather than another;
2. 'Passive' as becoming insensitive to certain feelings and emotions, to feel less, versus 'active' as being sensitive to feelings and emotions, feeling with a certain degree. In this case, passivity/activity is of *the faculty of sensation*;
3. 'Passive' as involuntary and pre-reflective: in this sense, being passive means being unaware, not noticing something, while 'active' means being aware and noticing something;
4. 'Passive' as acting with little or no conscious attention, versus 'active' as acting with conscious attention.

In what follows, I will suggest that (1) is part of the concept of habit, (2) corresponds to Butler's formulation of the principle, (3) can be found in Hume's treatment of habit as the cause of inductive inferences, and (4) is found in James' treatment of habit in his *Principles*. I will argue that the passage from (1) to (2) corresponds to the passage from the double nature to the double law of habit, (2) conveys the dualism between different faculties, or different kinds of habits, and (3) conveys the dualism between habit and will.

2.1 Activity and Passivity

There is a distinction between passivity and activity already at the level of the concept of habit itself (1). Indeed, we can distinguish between the process of becoming accustomed to something – being subject to the process of habituation – and the process of acquiring the habit of acting in a certain way. This co-presence of activity and passivity of habituation is part of the double nature of habit and the internal element of mechanization, for what we become accustomed to compels us in a certain way. However, this is not the sense of passivity which Butler presupposes in his treatment of the principle of habit (2). For the sake of my argument, I focus on two aspects of Butler's reflection: 1. The distinction between passive and active habits; 2. The role of repetition. The point I want to stress here is that Butler recognizes the dual effect of habit in terms of the dual effect of repetition on alleged different faculties instead of as the double nature of habit discussed above.

First of all, Butler distinguishes from the beginning between active habits and passive habits through the distinction between habits of perception and habits of action. The former are instances of passive habits and are, for example, the involuntary readiness

in correcting the impression of sight,[5] associations of ideas not naturally connected, and the readiness in understanding language upon sight or hearing. The latter refers to the readiness in speaking and writing, which is an instance of active habits. Secondly, given this distinction, Butler develops the "faculty of habits" by looking at the inverse effects of repetition on these two kinds of habits: while "passive impressions, by being repeated, grow weaker", active habits "are formed and strengthened by repeated acts", therefore "active habits may be gradually forming and strengthening, by a course of acting upon such and such motives and excitements, whilst these motives and excitements themselves are, by proportionable degrees, growing less sensible; i.e. are continually less and less sensibly felt" (Butler 1927, 65-6). Repetition is treated as a fundamental ingredient of habit acquisition and its effects are considered in the context of reflection on moral discipline and improvement: the main idea is that habituation improves moral discipline for it allows the agent to be more effective thanks to the weakening of sensation. Experiencing the suffering of others may entail a high degree of emotional engagement. From a practical point of view, this engagement may hinder effective concrete aid action. However, repetition of occasions of contact with suffering weakens the emotional response (passive habit) and reinforces the capacity of action (active habit). Habit's double law in this context is the dual effect of repetition on habits of perception and habits of action, and the concept of passivity implied is that of a weakening of the faculty of sensation: habit improves capacity for action *because* it weakens sensation, thus it involves a kind of progressive insensibility. The problem with this formulation is that substantial distinction between active and passive habits conveys the risk of philosophical dualism. Indeed, Maine de Biran (1970) develops the double law in a dualistic context where a difference between active and passive impressions corresponds to a distinction between two different faculties, namely sensation and perception. According to Maine de Biran, while passive impressions deteriorate and vanish through repetition, active impressions become clearer and more precise.[6]

(3) Besides Maine de Biran, Butler's principle was indeed taken up by other authors, such as Bichat (1809) and Ravaisson (2008), but the passive element of habituation is not exclusively characterized by reference to sensation against action. For example, Hume's

5 Butler uses Locke's example of the involuntary belief to immediately sense visual objects as three dimensional, though we actually make an inference that they are so on the basis of their varying sensations of colours and shadow (Locke 1975, II.IX.8, 145).

6 The possibility of a dualistic theoretical drift is not a necessity, rather it is just a risk. Indeed, a continuistic approach can be also compatible with the double law, such as Ravaisson's anti-dualistic claim that unreflective spontaneity is both active and passive.

account of habit as the basis of inductive inferences seems to imply a different use of the concepts of passivity and activity. Hume is mentioned among the authors who actually take up Butler's principle because – even though he does not talk about a double law – he distinguishes between active and passive habits when he writes that "custom increases all active habits, but diminishes passive" (Hume 1896, 221). This is presupposed in his treatment of the calm passions (Wright 2022): some passions are originally violent and only become calm through custom and habit in virtue of the principle according to which passive impressions become calm when constantly repeated (Hume 1896, 219). However, a different sense of the couple activity-passivity – sense (3) – is assumed in his treatment of habit as the cause of inductive inferences. According to Hume, inductive inferences often occur without explicit reflection on past experience, and they operate in mind "in such an insensible manner as never to be taken notice of and may even in some measure be unknown to us", because "custom operates before we have time for reflection" (Hume 1896, 60). In this context, there is no reference to Butler's dual effect of habit respectively on sensation and action. We might see the reference if we presuppose an identification between pre-reflective and passive but, firstly, the former does not necessarily mean the latter and, secondly, even if we endorse this identification, we would work with a different concept of passivity than the one applied to the faculty of sensation. 'Passive', in this context, means 'pre-reflective', 'involuntary' and 'insensible manner' seems to be equivalent to 'unawareness' rather than insensibility, that is to say, it is not a matter of 'feeling less', but a matter of 'not reflectively noticing' what has become automatic. Indeed, according to Hume, inferences from past experience are fundamentally involuntary (Wright 2022). This second way of explaining passivity in habitual action reinforces the traditional dualism between habit and will.

2.2 From Passive Habits to Involuntary Habits

The principle of the double law becomes the root of the traditional dualism between habitual behaviour and voluntary behaviour through the conceptual assumption according to which 'passive' – *in all the senses* distinguished above – amounts to 'involuntary'. In other words, firstly, the co-presence of activity and passivity in the concept of habit has been developed into a distinction between passive habits and active habits affected by repetition in an inversely proportional manner. Secondly, the latter distinction has been further developed into the distinction between voluntary behaviour and involuntary behaviour via the conceptual identification of the automaticity of action acquired through habituation to its irreducible mechanization.

Wright (2022, 89) characterizes the paradox of habit in terms of the fact that "while thoughts and actions that result from repetition in some cases appear voluntary and free, in others they are involuntary and determined", that is to say, habits are both compulsive forms of behaviour and acquired skills, but even acquired skills "when fully developed can apparently be performed mindlessly and without any act of the will on the part of the agent". Now, this idea seems to be assumed by the authors mentioned above, and we find it already in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in which he actually makes a sharp distinction between voluntary and involuntary habits on the basis of a distinction between voluntary and involuntary action (Wright 2022). The point I want to stress here is that Locke works with a 'demanding' concept of will: an action is voluntary only if it follows an order or command of the mind. Accordingly, an action is involuntary if it is performed without this preceding thought of the mind. However, according to Locke, custom and habit make us lose awareness of the actions of the mind, and they thereby become involuntary. Involuntary habits – such as the shutting of the eyelids and the idiosyncratic speech pattern – are actions that occur without thought or reflection because either there is no preceding thought, or we are not aware of them because of the speed of performance. I think that this very sense of involuntary habit is presupposed by Hume when he says that inferences from past experience are involuntary because they are performed without paying attention to the operations of the will. In this case, the conceptual association is between passive and unaware, and then between unaware and involuntary.

Butler's principle assumes a concept of passivity in terms of passivity of the faculty of sensation, but he also assumes a concept of voluntary action as self-aware action. His distinction between active and passive habits is a distinction between voluntary actions as self-conscious actions – in terms of awareness of the operation of the mind – and involuntary readiness.[7] Finally, even the fourth sense of passivity mentioned above – absence of conscious attention during execution – can be associated with absence of will. In this case the conceptual association is between passive and unconscious, and then between unconscious and involuntary. This is the case of Ravaisson's development of the double law. According to Sinclair (2019, 52) Ravaisson works with the assumption that consciousness is a function of the will, therefore "he is unable to accept the claim that consciousness could decline in the acquisition of a habit while the will remains as it was". By contrast, this is something defended for example

7 However, differently from Locke and Reid, Butler argues that habit as repeated practice makes voluntary action possible.

by Porterfield (1752), for he argues that some bodily actions – such as the motions of the eyes – are voluntary but unconscious, and they become unconscious through habit.

2.3 To Sum Up

So far, I have suggested thinking about the double law of habit as a theoretical way to give an account of the double nature of habit, that is, the co-presence of the element of activity and the element of passivity in habitual action. In particular, I have distinguished between four different ways to employ the concepts of activity and passivity, and I have suggested that traditional formulations of the double law entail the risk of two kinds of philosophical dualism: the dualism between two different faculties, or two substantially different kinds of habits, and the dualism between habit and will. Overall, I isolate three main theoretical points of the double law of habit:

1. The opposition between sensation and action – differently affected by repetition;
2. The idea that the capacity for action increases through the weakening of sensation;
3. The conceptual association between passive as mindless and involuntary on the basis of a concept of voluntary action as explicit deliberation of which the subject is conscious.

In what follows, I shall argue that these theoretical points are not necessarily endorsed by philosophers working on the philosophy of habit and who recognize habit's double nature. In particular, I shall argue that they are not endorsed by James, although he does make sense of the double nature of habit. My idea is that James does not formulate the traditional double law of habit – for he does not assume the above points – but he does recognize the double nature of habit, therefore he constitutes an interesting example of the fact that recognition of the latter does not entail endorsement of the former.

3 James' *Principles of Psychology*

In this section I argue that James does not formulate the traditional double law of habit, although he re-formulates the double nature of habit through the scientific notion of plasticity. In particular, James' characterization of habit does not assume the three points mentioned above:

1. In *Principles* we find the fourth sense of passivity mentioned in section 2: the opposition is not between sensation and action, but it is between conscious attention and action even

though, as we shall see, conscious attention never disappears completely;
2. James does not endorse the assumption that the capacity of action increases through the weakening of sensation;
3. James admits the possibility of voluntary and intelligent action to which we are not consciously attentive;

There seems to be a reference to the double law of habit in James' formulation of the two practical applications of the principle of habit to human life in chapter 5 of *Principles*:

1. "Habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes them more accurate and diminishes fatigue" (James 1914, 26);
2. "Habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed" (James 1914, 31).

However, I argue that the two applications are not a re-presentation of the traditional double law for two reasons: firstly, from a terminological point of view, James does not talk about a double law of habit, and he does not talk about alleged different laws of habit in terms of different operating principles. Secondly, in terms of content, James' characterization of the principle of habit does not involve a weakening of sensation, rather its redirection. In what follows, I shall first address the terminological stance by presenting a comparative analysis of three versions of James' text on habit: chapter 5 of *Principles* (James 1914), the article *The Laws of Habit* (James 1887), chapter 10 of *Psychology: Briefer Course* (James 1923).[8] Secondly, I shall discuss James' characterization of the principle of habit and the role assigned to sensation.

3.1 Language

As a first step, let's compare chapter 5 of *Principles* to the article *The Laws of Habit*, for the former is a second version of what James wrote in the latter in 1887. The first striking aspect is the difference between the two titles: from 'The Laws of Habit', to simply 'Habit'. James removes the plural form and the reference to laws. The second striking aspect is that in both texts – even though the title of the article might confuse – there is no actual mention of plural laws of habit, or of the double law of habit. James employs the expression 'the law of habit' twice in the texts. The first occurrence is at the beginning of the section on the ethical implications of habit (James

8 Henceforth *Briefer Course*.

1914, 48; 1887, 446). The second occurrence is in a section in which James argues that attention and effort do depend on brain processes – even if we still do not know to what brain processes they correspond – because "they seem in some degree subject to the law of habit, which is a material law" (James 1914, 65; 1887, 450). The plural 'laws' is used for the expression 'the laws of nature', which he actually defines in terms of "immutable habits" (James 1914, 4; 1887, 433). However, he does not write about alleged plural laws of habit, neither explicitly, nor implicitly. The plural form is used to write about the practical applications of the (singula) principle of habit to human life, which James addresses in terms of results (James 1914, 26; 1887, 439) and the ethical implications of the law of habit, together with some maxims of conduct (James 1914, 48; 1887, 446). Given this, my hypothesis is that the plural expression 'the laws of habit', which actually appears only in the title of the 1887 article, does not refer to the functioning of habit as a process, but to the plurality of natural laws which James characterizes in terms of habits.

This hypothesis is confirmed by the further comparison between chapter 5 of *Principles*, and chapter 10 of *Briefer Course*, which is a later and reduced version of chapter 5. In chapter 10, James keeps the changes made in the passage from the 1887 article to chapter 5 of *Principles*, but he further reduces and slightly changes the latter as well. First, James does not mention alleged laws of habit and the double law of habit. On the contrary, he even removes the expression 'the law of habit' which was present in *Principles* at the beginning of the section on the ethical implications of habit and he substitutes the expression 'the principle of habit': from "the law" (James 1914, 48), to "the principle" (James 1923, 142). Secondly, in this third version of the text, it is more clear that it would be inappropriate to ascribe to James a re-presentation of the double law in its traditional form from a content-point of view, that is to say, if we look at his own view on the nature and the functioning of the principle of habit. I shall discuss this in the following section.

3.2 The Role of Sensation

According to James, a simple habit is, from a mechanical point of view, a reflex discharge and, from an anatomical point of view, a path in the nervous system, while complex habits are "concatenated discharges in the nerve-centres, due to the presence there of systems of reflex paths" (James 1914, 12-13). At the bottom, for James a habit is a physical principle. Indeed, his characterization of habit can be seen as a synthesis between the views of Carpenter and Dumont (Caruana, Testa 2020). However, as clearly shown by Bella (2020) too, James' view is not reducible to a mechanistic interpretation of habit

as blind routine, especially because of his use of the Darwinian notion of plasticity which gives habits a flexible and teleological structure in analogy with organic materials. Plasticity means "the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once" (James 1914, 6). In *Principles*, James offers a definition of habit, some practical consequences of the principle of habit to human life, and some ethical implications. For the sake of my argument, I will focus on the practical consequences and the role of sensation in the construction of the principle of habit, for this is the place in which James seems to formulate the double law of habit. Within this context, I shall argue that facility of action is not explained in terms of a proportional weakening of sensation, and that sensation has an important role in habitual action.

As we have seen, the first practical consequence of the principle of habit is that movements become more accurate and fatigue diminishes (James 1914, 26). However, the facility of movements is not explained by James in terms of a different effect of repetition on passive and active faculties, rather it is explained with reference to the permeability of the neural paths. The more neural paths are permeable, the more they can set up with less and less strong stimuli (James 1914, 27).

The second practical consequence is that habit diminishes the conscious attention with which acts are performed (James 1914, 31). It is in this specific context that we can see how sensation keeps a fundamental role in the execution of a habitual act. Suppose that the execution of a certain act requires a chain of contiguous nervous events, which James refers to also as muscular contractions: A, B, C, D, E, F, G. Now, the first times we try to perform this act, conscious will has to deliberately choose each event from other possible alternatives, so first A, then B, then C, and so on until G. However, after a certain number of executions, habit makes every event recall the next without first pondering possible alternatives and without the intervention of conscious will until the end of the chain, so that every time there is A, all other events follow as if they were in a continuous flux. The chain of nervous events activates with a little symptom – the presence of A in this case – without a deliberation for every subsequent event. Given this, James specifies that in executing a habitual act, what ensures the correct continuation of the chain (A, B, C, …) is neither a thought nor a perception, but "the sensation occasioned by the muscle contraction just finished" (James 1914, 35). While strictly voluntary acts are guided by idea, perception and volition throughout their whole course, in habitual actions *mere sensation is a sufficient guide* and "the upper regions of mind and brain are set comparatively free" (James 1914, 36).

"A, B, C, D, E, F, G" is a chain of muscular contractions that leads to the execution of a certain act. According to James, to every

muscular contraction there corresponds a sensation excited in the subject by the contraction when it is successfully performed: sensation *a* corresponds to contraction A, sensation *b* corresponds to contraction B, and so on until G. These sensations are usually in the muscles, skin, joints of the parts moved, and they can also be effects of the movement upon the eye or the ear. We are aware whether the contraction has or has not occurred through these sensations alone, which are produced by the contraction itself. In the case of a non-habitual action – such as when we are learning the series "A, B, C, D, E, F, G" – each sensation produced by the relative contraction is the object of a separate perception. This is what happens when we test the movement before performing the next one, when we hesitate, compare, choose with intellectual means: as stated above, in this case every contraction is the product of an earlier and accurate rational deliberation. By contrast, in habitual action, to perform "A, B, C, D, E, F, G" the initial impulse is sufficient – the command to start: then A, through the sensation *a* of its occurrence, weakens B, B leads to C through its own sensation *b*, and so on until the end of the chain. According to James, in this case sensations *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, *e*, *f*, *g*, are not singular and distinct volitions, but they are nonetheless accompanied by a certain kind of consciousness: they are "sensations to which we are *usually inattentive*, but which immediately call our attention if they go *wrong*" (James 1914, 43). According to James, habit thus depends on sensations not attended to and this inattentive feeling is a process that may still go on alongside of intellectual processes (James 1914, 48). This suggests the fact that for James, differently than Ravaisson, a mismatch between consciousness and will is perfectly possible, that is to say, there can be the case of an act which is performed with little conscious attention but which is nevertheless voluntary and this case is precisely that of habitual acts, or the "acquired aptitudes", which "differ from instincts only in being prompted to action by the will" (James 1914, 40).[9] Habitual action is involuntary in the sense that the sensations involved are not volitions – the will "limits itself to a permission that they exert their motor effects" (James 1914, 41), however, this does not mean that habitual action is mere blind routine. James quotes Carpenter and the idea that habitual actions never cease to be volitional, for an even infinitesimally small amount of will is required to sustain them. Indeed, according to James, a habitual act is automatic only apparently (James 1914, 45), and he makes use of Schneider's account of long-familiar handicraft:

9 For this reason, I think it might be interesting to compare James's view on habit to William Porterfield's (1752) and Dugald Stewart's (1994) views on habitual action.

> Knitting appears altogether mechanical, and the knitter keeps up her knitting even while she reads or is engaged in lively talk. But if we ask her how this be possible, she will hardly reply that the knitting goes on in itself. She will rather say that she has a feeling of it, that she feels in her hands that she knits and how she must knit, and that therefore the movements of knitting are called forth and regulated by the sensations associated therewithal even when the attention is called away. (James 1914, 44-45)

Therefore, in this context the concept of involuntary action seems to equate that of non-intellectualistic process, that is, the idea that habitual action is not the product of explicit deliberation through distinct acts of will but it is not involuntary in the sense of completely detached from the will, blind, unintelligent and purely automatic. Furthermore, the concept of inattentive feeling is not equivalent to that of unconsciousness: habitual action is performed with little conscious attention, but it is not completely unconscious, for a little degree of consciousness is still at work. In other words. James seems to admit the case of consciousness with little conscious attention, which immediately reactivates when the habitual action gets disrupted.

4 Conclusion(s)

Two conclusions can be drawn from my previous analysis. First, I tried to argue that we do not find in James' characterization of habit a re-formulation of the traditional double law of habit as developed by Butler and Ravaisson. In particular, James' characterization of the principle of habit does not involve what I presented as the three main theoretical points of the traditional double law:

1. James's account of habitual action is not construed in terms of the different effect of repetition on different faculties or different substantial kinds of habits (passive and active). Rather, the difference regards the degree of conscious attention during the execution of the act;
2. It is true that habit makes action easier; that is, it increases the ease and the capacity of action, but this result does not come from a weakening of sensation. Rather, the facility of action is explained in terms of an increase of permeability of the neural paths;
3. James' characterization of habit seems to avoid the two dualistic drifts to which the traditional double law can easily lead: dualism between two faculties and dualism between habit and will. Indeed, although James writes that habitual action is involuntary, this involuntariness is not characterized

> in terms of total absence of will, but as the fact that habitual acts are not produced through explicit acts of deliberation. In habitual action conscious attention diminishes, but never disappears, for it is ready to immediately re-activate when faced with some obstacles. A habitual action can still be intelligent. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that there is no reference to the double law of habit in Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* too (1901), in which James is mentioned among the consulting editors for English. Indeed, under the entry 'Habit' we do not find references to the double law or plural laws of habit, but only to the law of habit, which is defined in psychology as the generalization according to which "any function becomes thus modified and organized with repeated efforts". (Baldwin 1901, 435)[10]

Secondly, James' case is a concrete example of the fact that speaking in terms of the double law of habit is conceptually different from speaking in terms of the double nature of habit. That is to say, the double law of habit is a theoretical development of the co-presence of activity and passivity inherent to the concept of habit itself, but it does not necessarily follow from the recognition of habit's double nature. I argued that – as it is traditionally formulated – the double law of habit brings with it at least two theoretical problems: the idea that capacity improvement necessarily involves progressive insensibility (the association between passivity and weakening of sensation), and the idea that the passivity of action renders it involuntary and unintelligent.[11] These are two theoretical drifts hardly endorsed by current philosophers working on habits and habitual action within the new frame of 4E Cognition. This is, of course, not a sufficient reason to reject them, but I think it is at least a sufficient reason to reflect again on the nature and the possible philosophical consequences of the traditional double law of habit in the context of the current and renewed philosophy of habit.

10 The entry 'Habit' is written by J.M. Baldwin and G.F. Stout.

11 I am not arguing that all the authors working with the double law are actually doomed to endorse these theoretical points. I am just arguing that the traditional formulation of the double law inherently brings with it these possible theoretical drifts.

Bibliography

Croce, P.J. (1997). "Between Spiritualism and Science: William James on Religion and Human Nature". *Journal for the History of Modern Theology*, 4(2), 197-220. https://doi.org/10.1515/znth.1997.4.2.197

Croce, P.J. (2018). *Young William James Thinking*. Baltimore (MD): Johns Hopkins University Press.

Baldwin, J.M. (ed) (1901). *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*. New York and London: McMillan.

Barandiaran, X.E.; Di Paolo, E.A. (2014). "A Genealogical Map of the Concept of *Habit*". *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8, 1-7. https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00522

Bella, M. (2020). "'Bundles of Habits': la Prospettiva Fisio-Psicologica di William James". *Lo Sguardo*, 31(2), 269-84. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5018652.

Bichat, M.F.X. (1809). *Physiological Researches on Life and Death*. Philadephia: Smith & Maxwell.

Bordogna, F. (2008). *William James at the Boundaries*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Butler, J. [1736] (1927). *The Analogy of Religion*. London: J.M Dent & Sons Ltd.

Carlisle, C. (2014). *On Habit*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203816943..

Caruana, F.; Testa, I. (eds) (2020). *Habits. Pragmatist Approaches from Cognitive Science, Neuroscience, and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dewey, J. [1922] (2023). *Human Nature and Conduct*. Torrazza Piemonte (TO): Zinc Read.

Hume, D. [1739] (1896). *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

James, W. (1887). "The Laws of Habit". *Popular Science Monthly*, XXX(8), 433-52.

James, W. [1890] (1914). *Habit*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

James, W. [1892] (1923). *Psychology, a Briefer Course*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Klein, A.M. (2025). *Consciousness is Motor: William James on Mind and Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/9780190085872.001.0001.

Locke, J. [1690] (1975). *An Essay Concerning Human Understandin*g, vol. 2 Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Maine de Biran, P. [1802] (1970). *The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking*. Westport (CT): Greenwood Press.

Malabou, C. (2008). "Addition and Grace: Preface to Félix Ravaisson's *Of Habit*". Ravaisson (2008), VII-XX.

Pedwell, C. (2016). "Transforming Habit: Revolution, Routine and Social Change". *Cultural Studies*, 31(1), 1-28. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2016.1206134.

Piazza, M. (2018). *Creature dell'Abitudine. Abito, Costume, Seconda Natura da Aristotele alle Scienze Cognitive*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Portera, M. (2020). *La Bellezza è un'Abitudine. Come si Sviluppa l'Estetico*. Roma: Carocci.

Porterfield, W. [1737-38] (1752). "An Essay Concerning the Motions of the Eyes". *Medical Essays and Observations: Revised and Published by a Society in Edinburgh.* Hamilton: Balfour & Neill.

Ravaisson, F. [1838] (2008). *Of Habit*. London: Continuum.

Sinclair, M. (2019). *Being Inclined. Félix Ravaisson's Philosophy of Habit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198844587.001.0001.

Stewart, D. [1854](1994). "Elements of the Philosophy of Human Mind". Sir Hamilton, W. (ed.) *The Collected Works of Dugald Steward*, vol. 2 Bristol: Thommes Press.

Sutton, E.K. (2023). *William James, MD Philosopher, Psychologist, Physician*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Turnbull, G. (1740). *The Principles of Moral Philosophy: An Enquiry into the Wise and Good Government of the Moral World*. London: John Noon.

Wright, J.P. (2022). "Habit and Will in Eighteenth-Century British Philosophy". J. Dunham; K. Romdenh-Romluc (eds), *Habit and the History of Philosophy*, London: Routledge.

e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA
Vol. 6 — Num. 2 — December 2025

"Bring Me an Apple!" Wittgenstein on Meaning, Customs and Training

Elena Valeri
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy

Abstract This paper explores remarks in Wittgenstein's later philosophy that implicitly engage with contemporary reflections on habits, customs, and practices. It begins by presenting his idea that our diverse activities, ranging from following rules to playing chess, constitute customs that we learn through training, much like animals. It then traces how the theme of training emerges from the outset of the *Philosophical Investigations*, particularly in relation to meaning and language learning. As will be shown, for Wittgenstein, learning fundamentally rests not on understanding or explanation, but on training; yet training alone cannot fully account for how practices are learned. It is decisively shaped by both our individual and species-specific nature and is complemented by a 'feeling', refined through experience and education, that enables us to recognise when to modify, reinterpret, maintain, or abandon a learned rule, rather than follow it 'blindly'.

Keywords Wittgenstein. Meaning. Customs. Training. Learning.

Index 1 A Short yet Essential Introduction. – 2 Customs and Training: An Overview. – 3 A Methodological Interlude. – 4 Training vs. Explanation. – 5 The Whole Story with Learning.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-10-31
Accepted 2025-11-05
Published 2025-12-10

Open access

Citation Valeri, Elena (2025). "'Bring Me an Apple!'". *JoLMA*, 6(2), 133-150.

DOI 10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2025/02/009

A dog, if you point at something,
will look only at your finger.
(David Foster Wallace, *E Unibus Pluram*)

1 A Short yet Essential Introduction

In light of the overarching theme of the issue in which this paper[1] appears, I have found it fitting to explore certain remarks in Wittgenstein's later philosophy – especially, though not exclusively, in the *Philosophical Investigations* – which, in my view, implicitly engage with, or, so to speak, intertwine in various ways with, many of the reflections on habits, customs, and practices (both human and non-human) that have emerged over the course of a long and uneven intellectual journey. This journey spans, at the very least, what the subtitle of a significant book on the subject describes as "from Aristotle to the cognitive sciences" (Piazza 2018), and includes numerous insights developed by key figures in contemporary philosophical pragmatism. In particular, both Wittgenstein and the pragmatists[2] share a view that is non-rationalistic with respect to human action, non-behaviourist with respect to human behaviour, and non-mentalist with respect to the mental. While it remains largely in the background, this view will serve as the point of reference for the present paper.

2 Customs and Training: An Overview

I shall focus on two groups of scattered remarks found in various texts – both manuscripts and typescripts – by the later Wittgenstein, with the primary aim of highlighting how these remarks are interconnected. Among those in the first group, the most frequently cited is probably the one in section 199 of the first part of the *Investigations*, where Wittgenstein writes that "[t]o follow a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs*

1 This publication is an output of the WITT-ART – Wittgenstein in Modern and Contemporary Art project (SOE2024_0000148, CUP: H73C24001980001), hosted by Ca' Foscari University of Venice and funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU – PNRR – Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.2.

2 A detailed discussion of these and other features of contemporary pragmatism can be found in Dreon 2022, esp. 1-69.

[*Gepflogenheiten*] (usages [*Gebräuche*],[3] institutions [*Institutionen*])" (PI, I, § 199). The second group consists of those remarks in which Wittgenstein observes that each of these customs (or usages, or institutions), along with many others that could easily be listed, is learned by children from adults through training. The key term of this second group is 'training', which, as Wittgenstein clarifies in a passage from *The Brown Book*, he uses "in a way strictly analogous to that in which we talk of an animal being trained to do certain things [...] by means of example, reward, punishment, suchlike" (BrB, 77). This analogous use of the term becomes even clearer in Wittgenstein's writings in German – the language in which he always wrote – as opposed to *The Brown Book*, which was dictated in English. The German word translated as 'training' is *Abrichtung* (verb: *abrichten*)[4] (see, for example, PI, I, § 6). This is precisely the term ordinarily used – alongside *Dressur* (verb: *dressieren*) – to refer to the training of animals, whether dogs, goats, magpies, or other species.[5]

The connection between the two groups of remarks just outlined is quite evident. Wittgenstein seems to suggest that, for example, obeying an order (see PI, I, § 206) is a custom, "an established usage [*ständiger Gebrauch*]" (PI, I, § 198) – in short, "a practice [*Praxis*]" (PI, I, § 202) that one learns by engaging in it through training, that is, by practising it. In a nutshell, practice requires practice. Consider the order: "Bring me an apple!". As Wittgenstein writes, "[o]ne is trained [*abgerichtet*] to do so [i.e., to obey an order], and one reacts to an order in a particular way" (PI, I, § 206) – that is, by doing what the order instructs: in our example, bringing an apple rather than, say, a book; bringing it instead of eating it, and so on.

Three points deserve attention here. The first is that training requires time and involves various methods and techniques – for example, repetition, correction, and different forms of behavioural adjustment. As we have already seen, Wittgenstein lists some of these but leaves the list open-ended: we are trained – in the way animals are – to do certain things "by means of example, reward,

3 'Usages' is the English translation of the German *Gebräuche*, whose singular form is *Gebrauch*; in other contexts, *Gebrauch* is rendered as 'use' (see, for example, PI, I, § 43). According to a well-known paper by Gilbert Ryle, 'use' should not be confused with 'usage': for whereas use is "a way of operating with something", "[a] usage is a custom, practice, fashion or vogue. It can be local or widespread, obsolete or current, rural or urban, vulgar or academic. There cannot be a misusage any more than there can be a miscustom or a misvogue. [...] By contrast, a way of operating with a razor blade, a word, a traveller's cheque or a canoe paddle is a technique, knack or method. Learning it is learning how to do the thing; it is not finding out sociological generalities, not even sociological generalities about other people who do similar or different things with razor blades, words, traveller's cheques or canoe paddles" (Ryle 1953, 174-5).

4 On the significance of *Abrichtung* in Wittgenstein, see also Borutti 2025, esp. 66-72.

5 In the case of horses, German also has the noun *Zureiten* (verb: *zureiten*).

punishment, *suchlike*" (BrB, 77; italics added). In the *Investigations*, we find perhaps the most detailed description of a case of teaching "by means of *examples* and by *exercises*" (PI, I, § 208):

> I do it, he does it after me; and I influence him by expressions of agreement, expectation, encouragement. I let him to go his way, or hold him back; and so on. (PI, I, § 208)

The second point is that the success of training reveals itself over time in the range of things one does and the manner in which one does them. This reference to temporal extension allows Wittgenstein to underline the problematic nature of the view that a rule – for example, the rule governing the use of the word 'plant', or the concept or "general idea" (WLC, 83) of a plant – determines in advance all its future applications, so that anyone who understands a rule already possesses, ideally or potentially, all its applications, even if they never actually apply it. Those who reason in this way, Wittgenstein observes, think that "the use of a word is like pulling a thread from a bobbin: it is all there and needs only to be unwound" (WLC, 83). In short, the concept or general idea is seen here as a mechanism that is static, i.e., fixed and unchanging over time, and yet determines what will happen over time (see WLC, 83). From this perspective, training appears doubly external to the concept or general idea, because what is learned is thought to be something that: a) already exists independently of any specific training; and b) could, in principle, be learned – or activated – without any training at all. The third and final point is that the same training may elicit different responses or reactions. Wittgenstein notes that, given the same order – "Bring me an apple!" – and the same training, one person may react "*thus*", for example by bringing an apple, and another "*otherwise*" (PI, I, § 206), perhaps by eating it. This naturally raises the question: "Who is right, then?" (PI, I, § 206) – that is, on what basis can we say that only the first person, and not the second, understood and obeyed the order "Bring me an apple!"?

3 A Methodological Interlude

There are at least two approaches to the remarks we have just mentioned, which more generally correspond to two possible ways of approaching Wittgenstein's philosophical remarks as a whole. One might be tempted – and this is the first approach – to find in his remarks a conception, doctrine, or theory that offers an explanation – at least an outline of one – of what a custom or practice is, identifying the conditions or causes – whether neurophysiological, psychological, or sociological – underlying its

emergence and consolidation. The limitation of this approach is that it seems to attribute to Wittgenstein, contrary to his explicit statements,[6] a theoretical stance and purpose whose results could be compared with other opposing or rival conceptions, doctrines, or theories. Furthermore, Wittgenstein himself excludes the possibility that all his remarks on children, their training, and so on should be understood as part of, or as a contribution to, child psychology. Indeed, after asking himself whether he was doing child psychology, he replies that what he was actually doing was "making a connexion between the concept of teaching [*Lehren*] and the concept of meaning [*Bedeutung*]" (Z, § 412).[7]

The second approach – much more in line with the note from *Zettel* just quoted – consists in viewing Wittgenstein's observations on customs and training as a 'tool' in the service of the "work of clarification [*Klärungswerk*]" (CV, 16) that he takes to be the primary task of philosophy. While not ruling out – and indeed considering it entirely legitimate – that someone might find in these remarks material for constructing their own theoretical edifice, I maintain that the second approach not only better corresponds to the way Wittgenstein conceived of philosophical work, but can also 'teach' something to those who, unlike him, aim to develop theories and provide explanations. Moreover, although this aspect is not often emphasised, Wittgenstein himself does not appear to exclude the possibility that his work of clarification "*might* also give a new direction to scientific investigation" (RPP I, § 950).[8]

6 Many quotations could be given in this regard, but I will limit myself to one: "It was correct that our considerations must not be scientific ones. […] And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. All *explanation* must disappear" (PI, I, § 109).

7 This remark presupposes Wittgenstein's distinction between factual investigation (such as that carried out in the field of child psychology) and conceptual investigation, which he equates with philosophical investigation (see RPP I, § 949). According to Wittgenstein, failing to understand this distinction is one of the sources of what he terms 'metaphysics': "The essential thing about metaphysics: that the difference between factual and conceptual investigations is not clear to it. A metaphysical question is always in appearance a factual one, although the problem is a conceptual one" (RPP I, § 949).

8 In the remark from which the quotation is taken, Wittgenstein presents a series of considerations aimed at clarifying the sense in which a philosophical investigation is conceptual rather than factual, explicitly referencing Goethe (see RPP I, § 949). He begins by noting that the task of "natural history" (RPP I, § 950) is to describe different plants, for example. Once all these plants have been described "in full detail", someone – inspired by what we might call 'a philosophical spirit' – might come to see "analogies which had never been seen before" (RPP I, § 950). By saying things like "'compare this part, not with this one, but rather with that'", this person "establishes a new order among these descriptions", which "*might* also give a new direction to scientific investigation" (RPP I, § 950).

4 Training vs. Explanation

As can easily be imagined, the idea of making a connection between the concept of teaching (and training) and that of meaning (see Z, § 412) is entirely absent from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, where there is no mention of children learning or teachers teaching.[9] For Wittgenstein, questions such as how a child learns their native language, and which strategies are most effective in helping them to do so, are factual questions that – like all facts – fall within the domain of science, specifically psychology, which, as Wittgenstein famously states, "is no more akin to philosophy than is any other science" (TLP, 4.1121). In a letter to Russell dated 19 August 1919 from Cassino, Wittgenstein reiterates his position on the matter: "the kind of relation of the constituents of thought" – "which correspond to the words of Language" – "and of the pictured fact is irrelevant. It would be a matter of psychology to find it out" (WC, 98-9).

It was during the first half of the 1930s that Wittgenstein's writing – particularly *The Brown Book* – began to refer increasingly to children learning and adults teaching. One might almost say that this signals a decisive change in atmosphere compared with that of the *Tractatus*. According to some scholars, Wittgenstein's experience as a primary school teacher between 1920 and 1926 may have contributed to this shift.[10] In this regard, there is a note in *Zettel* that appears to refer directly to his time as a primary school teacher: after writing that "[a]ny explanation has its foundation in training", Wittgenstein adds in brackets that "[e]ducators[11] ought to remember this" (Z, § 419).[12] I shall not pursue this issue further here. It is enough to observe that, particularly in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein frequently evokes scenes of teaching and learning,

9 If any such references are to be found, they are hidden within certain suggestions in proposition 4.002, such as the idea that "[e]veryday language is part of the human organism and no less complicated than it" and that "[t]he tacit agreements underlying the understanding of everyday language are enormously complicated" (TLP, 4.002). However, these suggestions primarily serve to remind us that "[i]t is humanly impossible to immediately gather from it [i.e., everyday language] the logic of language" (TLP, 4.002).

10 Concerning Wittgenstein's experience as a primary school teacher, see Monk 1991, 192-233, Bartley III 1974, and Wünsch 1985.

11 In recent years, a substantial body of literature has emerged concerning Wittgenstein's views on education and their potential implications for the philosophy of education and educational sciences. For an overview, see Peters, Stickney (eds) 2017 and Peters, Stickney 2018.

12 It should not be forgotten that one of the key targets of the Austrian school reform introduced after the end of the First World War – during which Wittgenstein became a primary school teacher – was the so-called *Drillschule*, which was characterised by rigid and repetitive teaching methods. It is possible that this note in *Zettel* also contains an implicit criticism of the pedagogical ideas that underpinned the reform.

which seem to play a significant role in his philosophical work of clarification. After all, as is well known, the *Investigations* opens with a lengthy quotation from Augustine's *Confessiones* (Book I, Chapter 8), in which Augustine recounts how he learned his native language from adults.[13]

Let us now examine how Wittgenstein introduces the theme of training in the opening sections of the *Investigations*. At the start of section 5, aiming to dispel the "haze" or "fog" surrounding "the working of language" that prevents us from having a "clear vision" of it, Wittgenstein proposes that we should "study the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of use" (PI, I, § 5). Among "such primitive forms of language" (PI, I, § 5) – that is, among such language-games –[14] he includes those that a child employs when learning to talk. Following this methodological proposal, Wittgenstein immediately adds a clarification: "[h]ere [that is, when it comes to teaching a child their native language] the teaching [...] is not explaining [*kein Erklären*], but training [*ein Abrichten*]" (PI, I, § 5).[15] Why does Wittgenstein make this addition, and why is it – so I shall argue – important and far from marginal?

What should be noted first is that, in the closing remarks of section 5, Wittgenstein is still continuing his discussion of Augustine and the way in which the latter tells us how he learned his native language. In fact, if, after reading section 5, we return to the passage from the *Confessiones* with which the *Investigations* opens, we realise – perhaps not without some surprise – that the protagonist of the story Augustine tells is none other than the child Augustine himself. In this story, the adults do not appear particularly interested

13 I reproduce here, in its English version, the full passage quoted by Wittgenstein: "When grown-ups [adults] named some object and at the same time turned towards it, I perceived this, and I grasped that the thing was signified by the sound they uttered, since they meant to point *it* out. This, how ever, I gathered from their gestures, the natural language of all peoples, the language that by means of facial expression and the play of eyes, of the movements of the limbs and the tone of voice, indicates the affections of the soul when it desires, or clings to, or rejects, or recoils from, something. In this way, little by little, I learnt to understand what things the words, which I heard uttered in their respective places in various sentences, signified. And once I got my tongue around these signs, I used them to express my wishes" (PI, I, § 1, note 1).

14 See section 7, in which Wittgenstein specifies: "I will call these games", i.e., "the games by means of which children learn their native language [*Muttersprache*]", "'*language-games*' and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game" (PI, I, § 7).

15 On the importance of distinguishing between explaining and training, with particular reference to the role this plays in the opening sections of the *Investigations*, see, for example, Moi 2017, 28: "We don't teach a little child to speak by *explaining* how words are used. We *train* the child until he or she becomes adept enough to understand explanations [...]. The distinction between *training* and *explaining* is crucial. Training is constant practice; explaining is giving reasons".

in him. They speak, name objects, utter sounds, etc. Augustine, however, observes them and, in observing them, engages in various activities: he perceives, grasps, draws inferences from what he sees, etc. Eventually, once he has mastered these signs, he is able to use them – just as adults do – to express his needs and desires.

It is true that the child Augustine can only observe because, like any child who cannot yet speak, he "cannot as yet *ask* what the name is" (PI, I, § 6). Nevertheless, as Augustine recounts it, he does many things inwardly that, one might say, children at this stage do not do: he searches for and invents explanations, makes conjectures, tests them, etc. That is why, in section 32 – recalling Augustine's story for the last time – Wittgenstein comments, thereby revealing one reason for beginning the *Investigations* with the quotation from *Confessiones* (I, 8), that one might say something like this:

> Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a foreign country and did not understand the language of the country, that is, as if he already had a language, only not this one. Or again, as if the child could already *think*, only not yet speak. And "think" would here mean something like "talk to himself". (PI, I, § 32)

This Augustinian description of language learning is precisely what Wittgenstein's warning that "any explanation has its foundation in training" (Z, § 419) directly opposes.

What Wittgenstein makes explicit in section 32 is already foreshadowed in section 6, where he observes that children can be taught to use certain words and to respond in specific ways to the words of others through what he calls "ostensive teaching" (PI, I, § 6). This consists "in the teacher's pointing to the objects, directing the child's attention to them, and at the same time uttering a word" (PI, I, § 6). Here, as Wittgenstein immediately points out, he speaks of "ostensive teaching" and deliberately avoids "ostensive explanation", since it is misleading to speak of an explanation in cases where "the child cannot yet *ask* what the name is" (PI, I, § 6). If we take Augustine's account at face value, we must conclude that the child Augustine already knew perfectly well how to "*ask* what the name is" (PI, I, § 6) – even if he could only ask it, so to speak, inwardly, in a language that was not the one he was later forced to learn in order to express his needs and desires to others.

What Wittgenstein seeks to highlight – here as elsewhere – is the picture, model, or paradigm that guided Augustine in telling his story about how he learned his native language, and that continues, more or less consciously, to inform many philosophical and scientific theories of language and its acquisition. Part of Wittgenstein's philosophical work consists in weakening the hold of this picture

and the mythologies that accompany it. In particular, with reference to our present discussion, Wittgenstein aims to challenge the 'rationalist' conception of human beings and their language – one of the picture's most distinctive features. This aim also underlies his references to primitive forms of language (such as the language of the builder A and assistant B in section 2), which children – as we can readily concede – learn "from the grown-ups [adults] by being trained to its use" (BrB, 77). Above all, as we have seen, he is guided by this aim when stressing that, in such cases, we can "use the word 'trained' in a way strictly analogous" (BrB, 77) to the way in which it is used for animals.

When Wittgenstein makes this point – and it should be emphasised at once – he does not intend to advocate any form of biological or naturalistic reductionism. Rather, he suggests that animals can sometimes – and it is important to stress that 'sometimes' does not mean always – serve as a more illuminating term of comparison than, for example, philosophers engaged in reflection or scientists conducting experiments. In this sense, much of what Wittgenstein says in the above-mentioned sections of the *Investigations* can be seen as consistent with the heuristic maxim he later formulates in *On Certainty*: "I want to regard man here as an animal [*Tier*]; as a primitive creature, to whom one grants instinct, but not reasoning" (OC, § 474). That this is a heuristic maxim is clear: Wittgenstein is not asserting, in any ontologically reductionist spirit, that human beings are in reality animals. Rather, he invites us to take off – at least for a while – the rationalist spectacles through which we habitually observe human beings and their behaviour.[16] Take, for example, the confidence with which we typically bring an apple (and not, say, a corkscrew) to someone who order us to bring them one. But what kind of confidence is this? Wittgenstein tells us that he wants to conceive of it "as something animal" (OC, § 359) – that is, as something immediate, that is, not mediated by reasoning, reflection, or thought. As has been written to clarify this issue:

> Training does not presuppose understanding, but only patterns of reactions on the part of the trainee. A child will look in the direction in which one points, while a cat will look at the pointing finger. (Glock 1996, 112)

Once again, three things should be noted here. First, Wittgenstein states that he wants to regard humans as animals, not machines.

16 On this metaphor, which has a rather long history, see PI, I, § 103: "The idea is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off".

Obeying the order "Bring me an apple!" by actually bringing an apple – without reasoning, reflecting or thinking about it – does not mean doing so passively or mechanically. After all, even in the case of a horse trained to jump an obstacle, it would be odd to say that it does so passively or mechanically. Second, if someone were to ask me why I brought an apple to the person who ordered me to do so, I would not usually answer: "Because I have been trained to do so", but rather: "Because I was ordered to bring an apple". In short, saying that we have been trained to obey such an order in this way does not mean that training mediates between the order and its execution; rather, it means that we usually obey the order immediately. Between the order and its execution there is usually nothing, not even training. Third, an order, like everything else we do and say, is always given and obeyed in specific circumstances and for a variety of purposes. For example, someone might give me the order "Bring me an apple!" not because they want to eat an apple, but to test whether I am always so passive and obedient. And I might disobey that order not because I have failed to understand it or am unsure how to carry it out, but because I wish to assert my autonomy. Of course, there are also circumstances in which I might be unsure how to carry out an order as seemingly trivial as "Bring me an apple!". For example, I might ask myself – I will leave it to the reader to imagine the situation – whether bringing a glass apple would counts as obeying the order. Clearly, this is far removed from the primitive forms Wittgenstein evokes at the beginning of the *Investigations*. In the cases just considered, various kinds of reflection may intervene between the order and its possible execution, giving rise to the most diverse responses. However, as Wittgenstein observes, these "more complicated forms" (CV, 36) are refinements of those primitive forms. It is precisely because we have been trained to react in a certain way to an order that, in particular circumstances, we can later ask ourselves whether that is in fact how we should obey it. In Wittgenstein's words:

> The origin & the primitive form of the language is a reaction; only from this can the more complicated forms grow.
>
> Language – I want say – is a refinement, 'in the beginning was the deed'. (CV, 36)

There is a note in *Zettel* that may help to clarify the passage just quoted. In it, Wittgenstein distinguishes between a behaviour that is "the result of thought" and a "primitive" behaviour that functions

instead as "the prototype of a way of thinking" (Z, § 541).[17] This means that if I am able to think about whether and how I should obey an order, and to reach the conclusion that what I should do is this, it is because I first learned to obey an order – so to speak – without thinking about it.[18]

5 The Whole Story with Learning

However tempting it may be, we must be careful not to succumb to the enthusiasm of believing that training alone offers a complete solution to the problem of meaning that Wittgenstein was addressing. Focusing exclusively on training would not move us forward; on the contrary, it would set us back. Indeed, if we reduce meaning solely to training, we risk reviving the idea of meaning as something fixed, determined by a rigid process or a kind of (causal) mechanism – an idea that Wittgenstein considered too narrow and explicitly sought to overcome. As we shall soon see, although meaning depends on training and customs, it does so only in part.

Actually, what we have seen so far represents only one aspect of the clarification that Wittgenstein aimed to achieve. Two further points help to complete the picture. The first stems from the insight that while training is fundamental to learning – and therefore to the acquisition of language and meaning – it is not the whole story. Training alone cannot account for everything in either humans or animals; clearly, humans and animals cannot be trained to do just anything, nor can the same training always produce the same results in different individuals. This (or something very similar) is what Wittgenstein has in mind when, in section 441, part I of the *Investigations*, he refers not only to "a particular training, a particular education",[19] but also to our nature as the condition under which, for example, "we are predisposed to express wishes in certain circumstances" (PI, I, § 441) or to obey an order such as "Bring me an apple!". The point here is that responses to training – whether facilitative or resistant – are linked to the nature of both the species

17 The primitive behaviour or reaction to which Wittgenstein refers consists of tending to or treating "the part that hurts when someone else is suffering – and not only when we ourselves are suffering" (Z, § 540). He concludes that this reaction – for example, gently stroking the hand of a child who is holding their own hand while crying – is primitive in that it is "not the result of thought" (Z, § 541). This could be the thought that, if the child is holding their hand while crying, they must really be suffering, or the thought that, unlike in my own case, I can only tell from their behaviour whether they are really suffering.

18 For further research on the concept of the primitive and its role in Wittgenstein's philosophy, see Perissinotto 2002.

19 The nuanced distinction between training and education, which is relevant to the second point I referred to, will be touched on later.

and the individual.[20] This explains why you cannot train a magpie in the same way as a horse, or a horse in the same way as a human, nor can you expect them to learn the same things. It also explains why, even when species-specific differences are taken into account and magpies are trained as magpies, there is still no guarantee that the training will be successful or unfold as expected. This may be due to the evident differences between individuals (on which, as is well known, Darwinian theory is based), whereby, despite receiving the same training and the same order – "Bring me an apple!" – "one person reacts […] *thus*, and another *otherwise*" (PI, I, § 206): for example, one brings the apple and another eats it.[21] In short, it must be recognised that training is conditioned by both differences between different species (interspecific differences) and differences between individuals of the same species (intraspecific differences).

One might say – and indeed, several of Wittgenstein's later remarks suggest – that much as it is impossible to teach a dog to fetch a stick if, every time one is thrown, it rushes off in the opposite direction, so too it may be impossible to teach the rule of addition to a child who persistently and confidently insists that "7" is the correct answer to the question "What is 2+2?". Wittgenstein addresses this issue in sections 185-7, part I of the *Investigations*. Here, he imagines a pupil who, when asked by the teacher to continue adding 2, writes: 1000, 1004, 1008, and 1012, once they reach 1000. When the teacher objects that this is not how the series should be continued, the pupil replies as follows: "'Yes, isn't it right? I thought that was how I *had* to do it'" (PI, I, § 185). Wittgenstein concludes:

> This case would have similarities to that in which it comes naturally to a person to react to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction from fingertip to wrist, rather than from wrist to fingertip. (PI, I, § 185)

20 I believe it is useful to reiterate here the methodological, rather than theoretical, intent underlying these and other similar considerations by Wittgenstein. He makes this intent quite clear in a much-cited remark from the second part of the *Investigations*: "If concept formation can be explained by facts of nature, shouldn't we be interested, not in grammar, but rather in what is its basis in nature? — We are, indeed, also interested in the correspondence between concepts and very general facts of nature. (Such facts as mostly do not strike us because of their generality). *But our interest is not* thereby thrown back on to these possible causes of concept formation; we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history – since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes" (PI, II, § 365; italics added). For discussion of this and related remarks, see Perissinotto 2016.

21 What remains open, however, is the question of on what grounds we can say that one person has understood and obeyed, while another has not. Here, I will simply note that Wittgenstein's concern is not to answer this question, but to show that, rather than clarifying matters, it is more likely to mislead us. This elliptical observation, however, would merit further exploration in another paper.

However different the cases of the dog and the child may be, they highlight two aspects. The first is that any kind of training is based on the trainee's instinctual behaviours. Although Wittgenstein does not dwell on the topic, his use of the word 'instinct' closely parallels its use in ethology. Instinct is not merely a reaction or response to a stimulus, but rather a specific way of reacting or responding to a particular stimulus. For example, a hole in a wall is a stimulus for a mouse, which reacts or responds by entering it and making it its nest, but it is not a stimulus for an elephant. The second aspect is that within certain limits, even instinct – especially in humans – can be modulated in different ways, making training difficult or even impossible, sometimes leading the trainer to say: "I really don't know what to do!". Once again, I would like to note that Wittgenstein does not intend to develop a kind of anthropology based on instinct, but rather to emphasise that, in some respects, it can be illuminating to "regard man […] as an animal; as a primitive creature, to whom one grants instinct, but not reasoning" (OC, § 474).

As has been said – and as is typical of Wittgenstein and his method – other considerations of a different kind can be identified alongside these. Wittgenstein devotes several remarks to a complementary issue, which likewise aims to highlight that training marks the beginning, not the conclusion, of the story. This point, which I have referred to as the second point, is encapsulated by the following questions: if the basis of all learning (particularly language learning) is training, and we learn through training rather than by asking for and receiving explanations, what are the limits of training? And which aspects of linguistic use cannot be reduced to training and to the primitive, instinctual reactions on which it relies?

We can sketch an answer to the first question by noting that Wittgenstein, of course, insists on reminding us that we have learned our language through training, and that this is how children have learned their native language throughout the centuries. However, he also acknowledges that there is no guarantee that learning will continue to be successful, and indeed it makes no sense to look for something that guarantees it. The best thing is to recognise that teaching and learning one's own language are rather strange phenomena. As Wittgenstein puts it:

> What a strange phenomenon that a child can actually learn human language! That a child who knows nothing can start out and learn by a sure path this enormously complicated technique. (RPP II, § 128)

Faced with this 'wonder', which arises when, for example, one realises "how a child starts *with nothing* and one day uses negations, just as we do" (RPP II, § 128), Wittgenstein neither takes the scientific

route – as Chomsky (1966) famously did –[22] which consists in searching for a theory to explain how and why this happens, nor does he indulge – as Kripke (1984) and Cavell (1999) did, albeit for different purposes – the sceptic's fears that it may cease to happen or even that it never really happened. According to Wittgenstein, it is better, figuratively speaking, to cultivate that sense of wonder and put it fruitfully to use in his work of clarification. This is evident, for example, in the way he addresses the idea that a rule is such if, so to speak, it guides us and compels us to call a red thing 'red', to bring an apple in response to the order "Bring me an apple!", or to reply that "2 + 2 = 4". Wittgenstein does not intend to exclude the possibility that there is such a thing as what we might call 'feeling guided and compelled by the rule'. But when confronted with the question: "What is it that compels me?" (RFM, VII, § 27), he offers two alternatives. One possible answer is that what compels me is the expression of the rule, together with the way I have been educated. Wittgenstein presents this first alternative as follows: "What is it that compels me? – the expression of the rule? – Yes, once I have been educated in this way" (RFM, VII, § 27). This means that it is not the rule itself that compels me to follow it, but rather I who follow it, in the way I have learned to do. In other words, it is not the rule that applies itself, but rather I who apply it. And applying a rule is something I have been taught to do, along with many other things. Yet Wittgenstein asks: why can't I say that the rule "compels me to follow it" (RFM, VII, § 27)? His answer – which reflects the second alternative – is that, yes, you absolutely can say that, if you wish. But if you do, you must be aware that, in saying so, you are thinking of the rule "as a spell that holds us in thrall" (RFM, VII, § 27).

Let us now turn to the second question. This leads us to one of Wittgenstein's oft-repeated insights (see, for example, PI, I, § 198), namely that there exist certain (and not so infrequent) circumstances in which the rule we have been trained to follow no longer 'tells' us what to do – or even appears no longer to be a rule at all. Let us consider a simple example. I have learned to call red things 'red'. And I have learned it precisely "in so far as there is an established usage, a custom" (PI, I, § 198) into which I have been trained. Well then, if more and more people began calling a jacket 'green' when I would call it 'red', I would inevitably find myself at an impasse and would probably have to choose between several alternatives: a) "The others are mocking me"; b) "Either I or the others must have an eye disease"; c) *à la* Davidson (see, for example, Davidson 2005),

22 Following Wittgenstein, Malcolm (1995, 71) criticised Chomsky, observing that, in Chomsky's view a child's acquisition of language appears as "a highly intellectual performance".

"They call 'green' what I call 'red'," meaning "We are simply not speaking the same language"; and so on.[23] This example shows that, although we typically (often and mostly) "follow the rule *blindly*" (PI, I, § 219) – that is, without reasoning, reflection, or thought – certain circumstances may prompt what might be described as a reflective return to the rule. Such circumstances lead us to reflect on the rule we have been following – whether that means modifying or reinterpreting it, abandoning it and inventing new ones, or continuing to uphold it with conviction. According to Wittgenstein, while in most cases rule-following involves a kind of 'blindness' to the rules, it also requires the ability to recognise – through a kind of sensitivity or feeling – those cases "where we play, and make up the rules" and "even […] alter them – as we go along" (PI, I, § 83).[24] What becomes evident is that, while training might suggest – if considered in isolation – the idea of blind adherence or unreflective application, this idea is in fact combined with and complemented by the further idea, repeatedly emphasised by Wittgenstein, that the custom or usage to which training introduces us is something dynamic and never static; that is, the use of meanings and the application of rules also involve (among other things) the development of a kind of "feeling for the rules" (LC, 5).[25]

This brings us back to a point I mentioned at the very beginning of this paper. Let us revisit it by considering a few remarks from Wittgenstein's *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*. As stated earlier, learning that results from training requires a certain amount of time and is demonstrated over time. If, as Wittgenstein invites us to do, we first "[l]ook at *learning* – and [then also] the *result* of learning" (LW I, § 926), it becomes clear that "[a]n important fact […] is that we learn certain things only through long experience and not from a course in school" (LW I, § 925). This is especially evident in the field of aesthetics, where what one learns is to express judgements, to form a taste, and to see things in a particular way. Let us consider two examples here as well. The first, offered by Wittgenstein, is well known: the art expert or connoisseur. Such a person is perfectly capable of saying things like: "'This picture was

23 See also LC, 62: "If you suddenly wrote numbers down on the blackboard, and then said: 'Now, I'm going to add', and then said: '2 and 21 is 13', etc. I'd say: 'This is no blunder'. / There are cases where I'd say he's mad, or he's making fun. Then there might cases where I look for an entirely different interpretation altogether".

24 Incidentally, we might observe that Wittgenstein has already 'resolved' in advance the tension which, according to Davidson (2025, 143), exists "between the thought that what a speaker intends by what he says determines what he means and the thought that what a speaker means depends on the history of the uses to which the language has been put in the past".

25 For an in-depth discussion, I would refer to my paper Valeri 2024.

not painted by such-and-such a master'" (LW I, § 925). Note that, as Wittgenstein emphasises, this verdict is "not an aesthetic judgement, but one that can be proved by documentation" (LW I, § 925). Of course, there was training and a period for learning, during which that person "probably had to look at and compare a large number of pictures by various masters again and again", but eventually "he looked at a picture and made a judgement about it" (LW I, § 925). Wittgenstein then asks, "[h]ow did he learn it? Could someone have taught him?"; and his answer is: "Quite. – Not in the *same* way as one learns to calculate. A great deal of *experience* was necessary" (LW I, § 925).

In short, learning (and being trained) is, as Aristotle would say, said (and done) in many ways. Learning (and being trained) to calculate is not the same as learning to speak, to judge, or to shape a cup out of clay. There are cases – including the way in which we learn to say the right word at the right moment – in which, when training someone, one "sets up certain *rules*, but only a few, which are of such a kind that a person usually learns them through experience anyway", and "what is left, the most important part, is *imponderable*" (LW I, § 921). Only extended education, reinforced by experience, can lead someone to know how to do certain things well or to express judgements and evaluations appropriate to the situation. This is why we can say, in a concise formula, that training is the foundation of education, but it is not the whole of education.

Obviously, what has just been set out does not mean or imply that everyone can learn from experience, or that they can do so in the same way. Observe that, in the passages cited above, Wittgenstein seems to speak of experience in the rich sense we use when we say of a man that he is a man of experience, or that, like Ulysses, he has had many experiences. But even of experience so understood, we could ask what Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* asks of experience understood in the sense of perception or observation of things and events: "But how *does* experience *teach* us this? *We* may gather it from experience, but experience doesn't counsel us //force us// to gather anything from it" (OC, § 130). We are again confronted with the dual aspect of Wittgenstein's considerations: if experience can teach us something, it does not follow that we can always – or in the same way – learn from it.

Let us now consider a second example, not from Wittgenstein himself, but taken from a commentary on Wittgenstein (Stickney 2020). Here we are presented with the case of a teacher – let us suppose it is an art lesson – who invites their pupils, when faced with a picture of a tree, to see the depicted tree differently; for example – this is my example – to see the tree's crown as the hair of a face. Indeed, "[i]f the teacher commands, 'Now see the tree like *this*', there is no guarantee that pupils see the alternate aspect to

which the teacher points" (Stickney 2020, 1293). This is because, we might say, seeing the tree's crown as hair "is unlike putting on new glasses or playing dress-up", that is, "[i]t is not simply a matter of attaching new pictures to the corresponding thing, but of gradually coming, through training and enculturation [what Wittgenstein calls 'education'], to react differently while seeing" (Stickney 2020, 1293).

This final example resonates with many of the points I have sought to illustrate in this paper. But to understand it properly, it must also be connected to what Wittgenstein says, for example, in the following note from *Zettel*, which is also taken up in the *Investigations*: "I want to say: an education quite different from ours might also be the foundation of quite different concepts" (Z, § 387; see PI, II, § 366). This shows that becoming who we are requires a delicate balance – by no means guaranteed – between the education we receive and how we respond to it.

Bibliography

Bartley III, W. (1974). "Theory of Language and Philosophy of Science as Instruments of Educational Reform: Wittgenstein and Popper as Austrian Schoolteachers". Cohen, R.S.; Wartofsky, M.W. (eds), *Methodological and Historical Papers in the Natural and Social Sciences*. Dordrecht: Reidel, 307-37.

Borutti, S. (2025). *Fare filosofia con Wittgenstein. Cinque lezioni*. Torino: Einaudi.

Cavell, S. (1999). *The Claim of Reason. Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chomsky, N. (1966). *Cartesian Linguistics. A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*. New York: Harper & Row.

Davidson, D. (2005). *Truth, Language, and History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Dreon, R. (2022). *Human Landscapes. Contributions to a Pragmatist Anthropology*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Glock, H.-J. (1996). s.v. "Explanation". *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell, 111-4.

Kripke, S. (1984). *Wittgenstein on Rule and Private Language. An Elementary Exposition*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Malcolm, N. (1995). *Wittgensteinian Themes. Essays 1978-1989*. Edited By G.H. von Wright. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press.

Moi, T. (2017). *Revolution of Ordinary. Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press.

Monk, R. (1991). *Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius*. London: Vintage.

Perissinotto, L. (2002). "Wittgenstein e il primitivo in noi". De Carolis, M.; Martone, A. (eds), *Sensibilità e linguaggio. Un seminario su Wittgenstein*. Macerata: Quodlibet, 157-70.

Perissinotto, L. (2016). "Concept-Formations and Facts of Nature in Wittgenstein". *Paradigmi*, 34(3), 11-31.

Peters, M.A.; Stickney, J. (eds) (2017). *A Companion to Wittgenstein on Education. Pedagogical Investigations*. Singapore: Springer.

Peters, M.A.; Stickney, J. (2018). *Wittgenstein's Education: 'A Picture Held Us Captive'*. Singapore: Springer.

Piazza, M. (2018). *Creature dell'abitudine. Abito, costume, seconda natura da Aristotele alle scienze cognitive*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Ryle, G. (1953). "Ordinary Language". *The Philosophical Review*, 62(2), 167-86.

Stickney, J. (2020). "Seeing Trees. Investigating Poetics of Place-Based, Aesthetic Environmental Education with Heidegger and Wittgenstein". *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 54(4), 1278-305.

Valeri, E. (2024). "Wittgenstein on Use, Meaning and the Experience of Meaning". *JoLMA*, 5(3), 93-112.

Wittgenstein, L. (1966). *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Edited by C. Barrett. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. [LC followed by the page number]

Wittgenstein, L. (1975). "The Brown Book". *The Blue and Brown Books*. Edited by R. Rhees, 75-185. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. [BrB followed by the page number]

Wittgenstein, L. (1978). *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. Edited by G.H. von Wright, R. Rhees and G.E.M. Anscombe. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. [RFM followed by the part and the remark number]

Wittgenstein, L. (1980a). *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*. Vol. 1. German-English parallel texts. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. [RPP I followed by the remark number]

Wittgenstein, L. (1980b). *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*. Vol. 2. German-English parallel texts. Edited by G.H. von Wright and H. Nyman. Translated by C. Luckhardt and M.A.E. Aue. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. [RPP II followed by the remark number]

Wittgenstein, L. (1982a). *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*. Vol. 1. German-English parallel text. Edited by G.H. von Wright and H. Nyman. Translated by C.G. Luckhardt and M.A.E. Aue. Oxford: Basil Blackwell [LW I followed by the remark number]

Wittgenstein, L. (1982b). *Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge 1931-1935. From the Notes of Alice Ambrose and Margaret Macdonald*. Edited by A. Ambrose. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. [WLC followed by the page number]

Wittgenstein, L. (1998). *Culture and Value. A Selection from the Posthumous Remains.* Revised 2nd edition with English translation. Edited by G.H. von Wright in collaboration with H. Nyman. Revised edition of the text by A. Pichler. Translated by P. Winch. Oxford: Blackwell. [CV followed by the page number]

Wittgenstein, L. (2008). *Wittgenstein in Cambridge. Letters and Documents 1911-1951*. Edited by B. McGuinness. Oxford: Blackwell. [WC followed by the page number]

Wittgenstein, L. (2009). *Philosophical Investigations*. German text with an English translation by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte. Revised 4th edition by P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. [PI followed by the part and the section number]

Wittgenstein, L. (2023). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated with an introduction and notes by M. Beaney. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [TLP followed by the proposition number]

Wittgenstein, L. (2025). *On Certainty.* German-English parallel texts. Translated and edited by P.M.S. Hacker. Bognor Regis: Wiley-Blackwell. [OC followed by the remark number]

Wünsch, K. (1985). *Der Volksschullehrer Ludwig Wittgenstein. Mit neuen Dokumenten und Briefen aus den Jahren 1919 bis 1926*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Semestral journal
Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage

Università
Ca'Foscari
Venezia