

Subject, Character, Habit

VeranstalterInnen:

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Darlegung des thematischen Schwerpunkts und der Fragestellung der geplanten Veranstaltung

We all are creatures of habit. This means that we have ways of going about our lives that are so simple and familiar that we do them automatically, that is, without thinking about them. Exercising habits comes as a second nature to us. They are involved in just about every human activity. Our daily routine of getting up in the morning, our walk to the workplace, our social interactions, our use of language, and even our patterns of thought and perception, all depend upon habits.

Even though habits play a significant role in shaping our life and common behavior, nowadays they seem to be a relatively marginal topic of philosophical reflection. This is particularly true after the so-called cognitivist turn in the philosophy of mind in the 1950s (cf. Barandiaran & Di Paolo 2014). However, what the study of the conceptual genealogy of the notion of habit reveals¹ is precisely that this very notion played a paramount role in philosophy through the first half of the 20th century, until it was replaced by the notion of “mental representation” following the jargon of the influential cognitivist paradigm of those times. The notion of a “mental representation” is a basic concept of the Computational Theory of Mind, also known as Representational Theory of Mind, according to which cognitive states and processes are constituted by the occurrence, transformation and storage (in the mind/brain) of information-bearing structures (representations). In this view, the mind becomes a receptacle of inputs from the outer world, incapable as such of autonomous volition or content determination, on the one hand, and of adaptation, i.e. changing in virtue of habits sedimentation, on the other hand. The philosophical tradition that stresses the notion of representation has thus

¹ Cf. the sub-plot in Figure 1, top-left, which shows trends in the use of the word “habit” and “representation” since 1850. Furthermore, the map in the same figure is as such very useful since it provides a birds-eye view that can be used to navigate the history of the concept.

systematically disregarded the function of habits in the constitution of our experience as well as our personal identity.

The aim of this workshop is to trace the genealogy of the concept of habit between its (re-)appearance in modern philosophy in the 17th century and its development in the early decades of the 20th century. Thanks to the contributions of outstanding international scholars (see tentative Program below), we hope to shed some light on the character-forming force of habit.

We consider the three concepts of the title, “Subject, Character, Habit”, as deeply interwoven. The notion of habit exhibits a descriptive, normative as well as ontological dimension. First, it is a notion that may help us obtain a phenomenologically correct description of how experience and cognition work. Second, it entails a normative and thus ethical character, which becomes particularly relevant in determining the concept of subjectivity in ethical and philosophical terms as a product of habits. Eventually, the process of habit formation is akin to an ontological category that finds expression in a peculiar structure of being, i.e. the being of subjectivity. In sum, the utmost importance of the concept of habit for philosophical reflection precisely depends on its being at the crossroad of epistemological, ethical, and ontological issues.

Concerning the first point, one observes an essential relation of habit to the subject’s past and her former’s mnemonic existence. As stated at the beginning, human subjects may be seen as creatures of habit for what regards their behavioral and cognitive patterns: we see and think according to automatisms that arose out of and through previous experience. A child who has never seen scissors before is not capable of cognitively grasping this object on the desk as such. The capability of perceiving something as scissors hinges on the sedimentation in consciousness of all previous encounters with the very same object-type. These experiences, and their retention in memory, establish what can be called a habit of consciousness. Habit can be then classified as a specific kind of memory that nevertheless differs in kind from simple recollection. In recollecting my past experience of having seen this scissor before, I am spontaneously engaging in an act of consciousness, which has the previous experience as its intentional object. Habits are not acts in this narrow sense. A habit is a sort of background, passively functioning condition through which an act of consciousness may take place. Thus, the law of habit can be defined as the law of passive association among experiential contents that are distant in time.

The notion of habit does not only fulfill a descriptive function in providing an explanation on how experience works. Furthermore, it hosts a peculiar normative dimension. This becomes evident as soon as one acknowledges the origin of the Latin term *habitus*, from which the English *habit* comes. *Habitus* can be traced back to two Greek words: *ethos* (ἔθος) and *hexis* (ἕξις). The etymology of *ethos*, from which the English term *ethics* derives, is twofold in meaning. It means both “an accustomed place” in which human and animals live or in-habit (a “*habitat*”) and “a disposition or character”, i.e. the individual personality which a person acquires during her lifetime. According to Aristotle, who was the first thinker to provide a definition of the concept of habit and introduce it into the philosophical discourse, the term *hexis* properly means “having” or “being in possession of something,” and its genealogy is found in the active verb *ekhein*, “to have” in the sense of a relational and active category: “a kind of activity of the haver and of what he has—something like an action or movement” (*Metaphysics*, 5.1022b; cf. also *Categories*, 8b26-9). The normative connotation of the concept of habit emerges from this – “‘having’ or ‘habit’ means a disposition according to which that which is disposed is either well or ill disposed” (*Metaphysics*, 5.1022b). The ethical implications of this conception of habit thus extend to a self-modifying practice, whose exercise is pursued to attain a virtuous character wherein spontaneity,

joy, and norms eventually converge. As an enduring “having”, *hexis* needs to be learned and developed through acquisition, appropriation, and assimilation. For Aristotle, moral virtue itself can be defined as “a state (*hexis*) involving rational choice” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b), so that *hexis* denotes a stable, relatively long-lasting quality in contrast to a more transient state (*diathesis*) such as being hot or cold (*Categories*, 8b26-29).

The Aristotelian interpretation of the notion of habit can be easily traced back, for instance, in Aquinas’ small treatise on *habitus* in the *Summa theologiae* (Aquinas 1964, 16-17/ST, Q.49, A.3) as well as in the Aristotelian tradition in French philosophy from the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century (e.g. Maine de Biran and Félix Ravaisson). What it reveals is a strict intertwining between the notions of habit and character and, by means of the obvious link of subject and character, also between the notions of habit and subject. To be a subject is, according to this view, to be a subject of habits. In a more recent formulation stemming from Edmund Husserl, we find the same idea expressed as follows: the subject is a “substrate of habitualities” (*IV. Cartesianische Meditation*). This entails that the individual is in a certain sense a product of her own history of experiences. What I am now, what I think, judge, perceive, and feel is namely the result of what I lived in the past, of my previous encounters with the world and other persons. My character is shaped through my own history, if I will it or not. Habits constitute my subjectivity without apparently leaving any room for the decision and self-determination of my own nature. They become for me a sort of second nature, i.e. a bundle of automatisms that, in contrast to instincts, are not innate but acquired through experience.

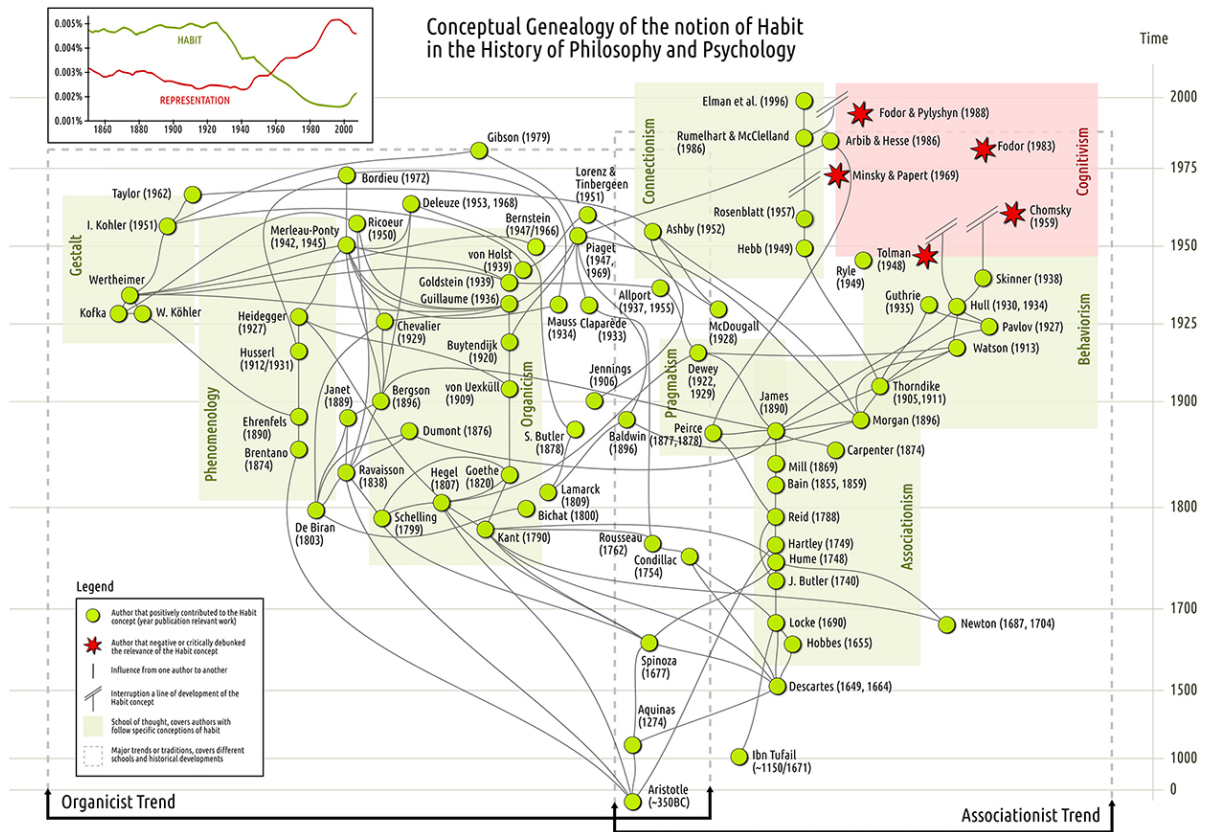
This is plainly at odds with the Modern conception of subjectivity that we find expressed for instance in Kantian philosophy. For Kant, a subject is primarily a morally responsible agent. By placing greater weight on the subject’s agency and freedom of choice, Kant criticized any approach that contends the centrality of virtues for the ethical sphere (cf. for instance *Metaphysik der Sitten*, AA VI, pp. 407 and 420). Virtues, as habits of the good, are for him devoid of any ethical significance due to their passive and unwilling character. Along with criticizing the viability of any ethical approach based on virtues, Kant simultaneously dismissed a conception of subjectivity based on the notion of habit by replacing it with one centered on activity and spontaneity. This view greatly influenced the contemporary understanding of what a subject is and what personal identity should eventually consist in. Needless to say, the rampant success of Kant’s and Kantian philosophy is in part responsible for the forgetting of the notion of habit among mainstream philosophers for the most part of the 19th and 20th century.

This sharp classical opposition between two conceptions of subjectivity, as agent of freedom and as product of habits, is precisely what our workshop seeks to put into perspective in a new way. The relativity of this opposition becomes evident as soon as one raises the following questions: Are habits a sheer product of the passive sedimentation of experience? Does the subject play a role in determining *what kind* of habits she acquires? Finally, is the subject in the second view not only a creature of habit, but also a self-determining actor and shaper of her own lifelong habitudes?

It is clear that to answer these issues we need a different assessment of the notion of habit than the one handed down by the philosophical tradition. In this respect, the ethical and ontological commitments towards providing a definition of habit are intrinsically related and thus should work, so to speak, hand in hand. Namely, the ethical significance of this notion may be appreciated only as one hands over the traditional conception according to which habits are nothing but blind automatisms over and beyond any subject’s decision-taking and activity. But contributing to reshape the notion of habit in this way means at the same time putting into question those ontological preconceptions which fundamentally underpin that view. An ontology of habit would then consist in arraying the various meanings of this

notion into natural, everyday discourse and placing them in relation to philosophical theories of the past and present. As a result, we would reach a theory of the meaning of habit, which has its rigorous philosophical grounding and simultaneously coincides with the needs of common understanding.

Figure 1: Conceptual genealogy of the notion of habit in the history of philosophy
(from Barandiaran & Di Paolo 2014, p. 2)



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² Cf. also for what regards in particular the phenomenology of habit Cavallaro, Marco. 2014. Annotated Bibliography: Writings on the Topic of Habit. *Phenomenology and Mind* 6: 274–283.

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