

Habit-Forming in a Time of Pandemic

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Abstract

Habit forming in humans is reflexive. We change ourselves and our environment in order to attain maximum comfort and well being. It is the effort that goes into these adaptive processes that forms a habit. The habit is intended to prevent us from constant experimenting and risk taking. The greater our well being, the better we function and the longer we survive. Habits can be thought of as obsessive-compulsive rituals intended to reduce and fend off anxiety and provide cognitive closure. They also have a pronounced social function and foster bonding, attachment, and group interdependence.

RESEARCH NOTE

In a famous experiment, students were asked to take a lemon home and to get used to it. Three days later, they were able to single out “their” lemon from a pile of rather similar ones. They seemed to have bonded. Is this the true meaning of love, bonding, coupling? Do we simply get used to other human beings, pets, or objects?

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Actually, when we get used to something or to someone – we get used to ourselves. In the object of the habit we see a part of our history, all the time and effort we had put into it. It is an encapsulated version of our acts, intentions, emotions and reactions. It is a mirror reflecting that part in us which formed the habit in the first place. Hence, the feeling of comfort: we really feel

comfortable with our own selves through the agency of our habitual objects.

Because of this, we tend to confuse habits with identity. When asked **WHO** they are, most people resort to communicating their habits. They describe their work, their loved ones, their pets, their affiliations or friendships, their hobbies, their place of residence, their biography, their accomplishments, or their material possessions (Sartre calls this propensity: “bad faith.”)

In other words: people refer to their “**derivative or secondary identity**” rather than their “**primary or autonomous identity**”, the stable sense of one’s kernel of self and of one’s self-worth. Surely all these externalia and paraphernalia do not constitute identity! Removing them does not change it. They are habits and they make people comfortable and relaxed. But they are not part of one’s identity in the truest, deepest sense.

Still, it is this simple mechanism of deception that binds people together. A mother feels that her offspring are part of her identity because she is so used to them that her well being depends on their existence and availability. Thus, any threat to her children is perceived by her as a threat to her own Self. Her reaction is, therefore, strong and enduring and can be recurrently elicited.

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The truth, of course, is that her children **ARE** a part of her identity in a superficial manner. Removing them will make her a different person, but only in the shallow, phenomenological sense of the word. Her deep-set, true identity will not change as a result. Children do die at times and the mother does go on living, essentially unchanged.

But what is this kernel of identity that I am referring to? This immutable entity which is who we are and what we are and which, ostensibly, is not influenced by the death of our loved ones? What can resist the breakdown of habits that die hard?

It is our personality. This elusive, loosely interconnected, interacting, pattern of reactions to our changing environment. Like the Brain, it is difficult to define or to capture. Like the Soul, many believe that it does not exist, that it is a fictitious convention.

Yet, we know that we do have a personality. We feel it, we experience it. It sometimes encourages us to do things – at other times, it prevents us from doing them. It can be supple or rigid, benign or malignant, open or closed. Its power lies in its looseness. It is able to combine, recombine and permute in hundreds of unforeseeable ways. It metamorphoses and the constancy of these changes is what gives us a sense of identity.

Actually, when the personality is rigid to the point of being unable to change in reaction to shifting circumstances – we say that it is disordered. One has a personality disorder when one's habits substitute for one's identity. Such a person identifies himself with his environment, taking behavioural, emotional, and cognitive cues exclusively from it. His inner world is, so to speak, vacated, his True Self merely an apparition.

Such a person is incapable of loving and of living. He is incapable of loving because to love another one must first love oneself. And, in the absence of a Self that is impossible. And, in the long-term, he is incapable of living because life is a struggle towards multiple goals, a striving, a drive at something. In other words: life is change. He who cannot change, cannot live.

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