COMMENTS

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William James says that habit is the flywheel of society, and this metaphor comes up either explicitly or implicitly in each of the papers. A flywheel conserves energy through its circular motion. It spins continuously when an energy source is provided intermittently and will continue to spin when energy is withdrawn. Operating a potter’s wheel, for example, does not require pushing the pedal continuously; the flywheel keeps the clay spinning for a while when the leg is resting. Recently, engineering student Max von Stein created a bicycle with a flywheel in the center, which presumably makes riding the bike an easier and happier experience.

James chooses his metaphors carefully. In this case, societal practices are preserved even when people are not putting energy into thinking about them. Few would argue that it is bad for people to bike and make pottery more easily, but when it comes to the maintenance of societal practices, easier is not always better. We want conserved motion, but we do not necessarily want conservative politics. The presence of useful habits, as Philip Mack argues, might indeed be a necessary and sufficient condition for personal happiness, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient for social well being. Flywheel social practices can preserve useful habits, but it also can preserve bad habits.

One example is the American war culture. In his famous “Resistance to Civil Government” essay, Henry David Thoreau refers to arguments against a standing army. But a standing army does not merely stand; it is impelled to move, and part of its movement comes from the flywheel of social practices. The public’s push for war is intermittent; the potential energy of the army is continual. The social habits we call holidays preserve this. Memorial Day, Independence Day, Armed Forces Day, Pearl Harbor Day, Patriot Day, and Patriot’s Day all serve to do two things. One, they promote a not entirely inappropriate valorization of noble sacrifice for the greater good; two, they conserve the war energy. The cliché expressed something like “Thank you to the brave men and women who sacrifice to preserve America’s freedoms” is the sign of a social flywheel, spinning out words that have a force of their own, irrespective of the particular war being fought. While the continual valorization of sacrifice for the greater good might not be a bad social habit, the use of the vague word “freedom” as a justification for all wars is.

Thoreau also chose his metaphors well. He says a government tries to preserve itself through social habit, “to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity” through “some complicated machinery.” But machinery has friction, and Thoreau notes that the existence of slavery and the invasion of Mexico are frictions so significant that we should break the machine. If the machine is still strong enough, and flywheels can help it continue, it might be necessary to break the flywheel. Civil disobedience does such a thing. It breaks the social habits.

As James Hitt explains, there are two types of habits. Simple habits are automatic and occur in different situations. For example, a nail biter will bite when stressed and when calm, when alone and in public. A more complex habit is something like putting on a seat belt. The hip-to-hip arm movement that one does when sitting down in a car would not occur in other contexts, such as sitting in a movie theater or sitting down to dinner. The habit exists, Hitt argues,
only in a social context that supports it. We buckle up in a car because we have been taught that that is a valuable activity because it preserves life.

Another example that illustrates the difference between simple and complex habit is that of a bird who has a habit of picking up shiny objects and a human who collects coins. The complex habit of the human is different from the simple habit of the bird in that the human’s habit is conditioned by a social agreement to regard certain shiny things as especially valuable. It is not the shininess that compels us anymore, but the system of value that establishes coins – both shiny and dull – as objects to collect.

This social agreement is essential for the existence, for example, of the role of departmental chair. As Hitt notes,

The tacit agreement is important. One continues as chair not in virtue of all members thinking daily, “Lo, the chair.” Rather, each member has formed dispositions to treat her as such. Agreement in the form of dispositions, that is, habits, maintains the continuation of that societal role as well as the social fact of who is the chair.

The agreements are tacit, and subtle. For example, one can often identify a boss at an off-hours party of co workers simply by the way that that person is treated. The deference and awkwardness identify what is a social custom and not a simple habit. They are accustomed to relating to a boss while sober at work; in the context of drinking and leisure their social habits are disturbed.

Complex habits are difficult to break. One person cannot delegitimize a boss. What’s more, one person cannot easily break even a personal habit that has strong societal conditioning. A source of insight here is William James’ father, Henry. In an interesting 1851 essay called “Intemperance,” Henry James gets especially personal. It was no secret that the elder James was a poor university student, and this seems to be in large part due to his drinking habits. “Like all habits,” Henry James says in reference to what is now called alcoholism, “its strength lies in a diseased will.” Henry James would take the view that alcoholism is indeed an ism, that is, a thinking habit. Alcoholics are uncreative thinkers. All isms – be they environmentalism, conservatism, lutheranism, etc. – are worn pathways of thought that recommend themselves to all new travelers. The more developed the habit, the more difficult it is to think in any other direction. Henry James claims to have overcome the drinking problem by choosing to forge his way off the path, and thus will himself out of the bad habit. The current belief, however, is that such willing might be a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one. Not only are biological determinants affecting the habit, but so are societal habits that make drinking in college almost as automatic as putting on a seat belt.

Biographer Alfred Habegger comments that although Henry James “insisted that the drunkard’s only remedy lies within himself, he also argued that society merely confirms him in his vice when it views him with disgust or reprobation” (93). As Henry James himself says, “Teach a man to believe himself at heart a sinner, and he will be sure to ‘play hell’, as the phrase goes, with his teachers.” Habegger’s biographical summary is that “if his strong beliefs in the power of will helped him overcome his self-destructive addiction, this strategy also kept him from recognizing the circumstantial causes of his trouble” (93). It is here that we see some indication of the dual aspects of habit, much like what Hitt is identifying in his paper. It would be too simplistic to say that an alcoholic is merely involved in a mechanical habit like nail biting. It is likewise too simplistic to say that alcoholism is simply a social phenomenon. Yet Henry James’ believed the latter. He regarded everything, including habits, as being social problems. He disdained selfishness, espoused socialism, and thus regarded individual vices simply as signs of social malady. The individual
represents dysfunction in society the same way that a recurrent rattling in one’s engine is a sign of trouble within the car’s general mechanical system. William James, especially as Hitt describes him, corrects this naive view. Alcoholism is both a mechanical and genetic habit, as well as a larger conglomeration of social values. Drinking as social acceptance, drinking as a consumer practice, drinking to assert autonomy (paradoxically, by losing a degree of rational autonomy): all of these are social values that condition the alcoholic’s condition. To modify Hitt’s example, we can say that the alcoholic is both like a bird who collects shiny discs without consciousness of their value in a social system, and a human who collects coins that have been assigned value based on the habits of many individuals. You need to address not only the mechanical – with medications, detox – but also the social, with therapy designed to change the system of values in which the alcoholic has operated. A necessary condition for stopping the habit of alcoholism is the stopping of social habits. Consumerism and hedonism are the prominent isms here. Of course William James’ ‘pragmatism’ is also an ism, which means it is, or at least can be, seen as a habit. According to Henry James all habit is bad, since he valued, perhaps naively, the supreme value of the kind of creativity that foregoes all imitation. For him, creativity was a God-like power, and even if God does not create ex nihilo, creating out of substance, God is nonetheless creatively ex nihilo, in that creation takes place without precedent. Henry James believes habits make us miserable. William James disagreed.

Philip Mack takes this rebellion from the son to its extreme, and argues that for William James, the presence of habits is not only a good thing but is the essence of happiness. Indeed one must acknowledge James’ words about the “miserable human being … in whom nothing is habitual but indecision.” A professor who grades essays without using so much as an implicit rubric ends up dreading grading. Each essay involves a cognitive effort ex nihilo. The task is indeed miserable until, after a number of essays have been evaluated, the mind, in self-defense, develops a habit of making the same comments on different essays. Yet we could grant that not having habits makes one miserable without agreeing that habits are all it takes to make one happy. Mack disagrees with Russell that leisure is required for happiness, and writes,

We can easily imagine a human who has no leisure time, but is nevertheless happy. Thus, we may conclude that on Russell’s account of the leisure-happiness relation, leisure is not a necessary condition to achieving happiness, though it is plausible that leisure is a sufficient condition to achieving happiness.

This might not be completely right, though. Sisyphus, for one, had no leisure time. In his thoughtful reading of The Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus says that we must imagine Sisyphus happy. This is not the easy act of imagination that Mack suggests. Sisyphus’ work is to push the rock up the hill, only to have it repeatedly roll back down. The closest he comes to leisure is at the top, when he must wait for the rock to finish its descent. The point is that we must imagine Sisyphus happy, and this is an act of defiance that takes work. Normally, we would not find happiness in perpetual work.

Camus famously said that the order of life is shaped by death. I might say also that the order of habit is shaped by exhaustion. James notes that “habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes them more accurate and diminishes fatigue,” which Mack summarizes as saying:
We all have limited economy of time and energy in our lives. So if we have to constantly think through every single action we undertake, we would not accomplish very much, and we would inevitably become very tired, which in turn would contribute to our accomplishing even less.

The argument is fine here, although the premise is questionable. How much do we really need to accomplish? Perhaps it is not as much as we think, especially if there is an external force compelling us to work. In the case of Sisyphus it was the gods; with the contemporary proletariat, it is The Man. Indeed, this is what defines work: the task comes from someone outside ourselves. Self work is just a vigorous hobby. We are worked by someone else, and create habits in order to meet the demand less strenuously. Mack could be right to say that someone working continually could be happy, but if they were working continually for The Man, we might say that his happiness is only apparent. He is just imagining himself happy.

James did not want habit to take over life. In fact, he allowed for moral holidays, which are times in which we resign the meliorative obligations to a greater benevolence. These are times of leisure, but the idea of “holiday” suggests that there is also something habitual about them. Holidays can refer to vacations, but they also can refer to social habits. They are, in effect, something like the paradoxical idea of habitual leisure.

A similar paradox is suggested by Sarin Marchetti, who does good work in outlining the social and individual aspects of habit. Habits are both common and uncommon. Marchetti says that although habits are helpful to the individual as an individual, “in the moral and political domain habits might represent a serious impediment for one’s social and personal flourishing.” This is indeed worth noting. I think it is satisfying to arrive at a moral or political opinion, and uncomfortable to be confronted with an opinion that challenges it. People select news sources that confirm their biases, and look at contrary news sources only for purposes of refutation. Selective interest, though a descriptively accurate statement of individual psychology, is prescriptively suspect when considering individual thought or political deliberation.

This is why it is appropriate to introduce the idea of unfamiliar habits into James’ philosophy. Marchetti says that habits whose “crystallization brings us to the very mortification of the self,” can “dissipate our moral energies altogether.” He has James “praise novelty and improvisation as morally refreshing stances and ideals,” and also says that we should be “worshipping heroic figures for their capacity to break the spell of custom and open new fields of possibility and meaning.” Exceptional individuals are ones who break out of habits. In “Great Men and their Environment,” James describes the great person by way of contrast:

It is one of the tritest of truisms that human intelligences of a simple order are very literal. They are slaves of habit, doing what they have been taught without variation; dry, prosaic, and matter-of-fact in their remarks; devoid of humor, except of the coarse physical kind which rejoices in a practical joke; taking the world for granted; and possessing in their faithfulness and honesty the single gift by which they are sometimes able to warm us into admiration. But even this faithfulness seems to have a sort of inorganic ring, and to remind us more of the immutable properties of a piece of inanimate matter than of the steadfastness of a human will capable of alternative choice. (Other Essays 247-248)

In this last line, we see support for Marchetti’s claim that James “refutes a
mechanistic characterization of the conditions of the functioning of habit.” James agrees with the common sense idea that to be completely habitual is to be mechanical. We do not know whether James thinks the simpleton he describes here is unhappy. Mack argues that he will be happy, since his habits are useful, and provide him with a convenient form of social interaction. If everything is literal, then there is no departure from the obvious. For all we can tell, he is happy, although ultimately not admirable. The great-souled person in this case is one who transcends the lifeless reactions of inorganic matter. This person exercises free will, and risks being misunderstood, while the slaves of habit remain safe from danger.

In sum, I am not sure whether we should be talking about unfamiliar habits, or the habit of looking for the unfamiliar. In the case of unfamiliar habits, we are just talking about a case of a more refined predictability, an elite set of habits; in the case of the habit of looking for the unfamiliar, we have something anarchistic. The only predictability would be in the fact that convention would be disregarded, and this kind of predictability is simply the contrast class to all that is habitual. Could a person with a well developed habit of looking for the unfamiliar be considered happy? Could a healthy social institution develop the habit of looking for the unfamiliar? My answer is, unfortunately, the common one. I would have to say that, in the case of both the individual and the society, the habit of looking for the unfamiliar can only be undertaken to a limited degree. Routine is required so that we maintain happiness, if not sanity, and yet routine can make us automatons rather than humans.

My best response to these papers on habit is to suggest that habit is good to a limited degree. We should flywheel the things that make us happy, while breaking the mechanism from time to time to ensure that we are not covering banality, if not immorality, with the comfort of the familiar. To say that habits are the essence of happiness is overreaching, and yet to say, as James’ father did, that habits are the symptom of a diseased will, is also an exaggeration. What we can take from these papers on habit is the appreciation for the utility of resorting to a mechanism in actions that have limited moral implications. Let’s economize our bicycles, and even, perhaps, rubric our essay exams. We should not, however, allow external forces to flywheel us into being exploited or immoral, that is, into being personally overworked or socially caught up in a war machine whose inertia leads to unjustified wars.

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REFERENCES


