

The enormous fly wheel

Description

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â??Habit is thus the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agentâ?• (121). Thatâ??s how the philosopher William James (1842-1910) characterised the inertia evident in peopleâ??s behaviour patterns, from brushing teeth to putting into practice the benefits of a professional education. Patterns that are once established require no attention, unless you want to change them.

Once we human beings receive the cue to perform some habitual sequence the rest is automatic: touching the toothbrush leads seamlessly to reaching for the tube, turning on the tap, etc. Of course, habits can go astray, as when the absent-minded person enters his bedroom, removes his clothes and climbs into bed, only to realise later he meant to go to his room to dress for dinner (115). (*And weâ??ve all done that!*)



Smooth channels

James starts his discussion of habit by considering how a pool of water eventually finds its way to a drainage route. From then on the water drains more easily, following the same channel, as the channel gets deeper and impediments to the flow get worn away. So too for the human cognitive and motor systems â?? repetition of a task make certain flows along the nervous system smoother, such that the task becomes a habit.

James doesnâ??t here address the idea of ossification, calluses and other impediments to smooth flows brought about by repetition. Repeated bending of a piece of metal makes it stiffer (annealing) and ultimately more brittle. Rivers silt up. Muscles tighten through exercise, and tear.

Elsewhere Iâ??ve considered habits, habituation and habitats in conjunction with the role of the mass media and digital media in establishing and disrupting habituated patterns of behaviour and practice. See A nation addicted to smartphones.

Habit and attention

Currently Iâ??m interested in the issue of habit as it interfaces with the issue of *attention*. â??Habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performedâ?• (114), said James. In fact while doing things out of habit our attention can be directed elsewhere. Hence most of us who drive a car frequently and safely are able to do so while *attending* to something other than the driving â?? the car radio, a conversation, the scenery or daydreams.



Nature also comes into the picture. â??The laws of Nature are nothing but the immutable habits which the different elementary sorts of matter follow in their actions and reactions upon one anotherâ?• (104). James belonged to a school of thinking keen to unite psychological phenomena with the rest of the natural world.

Thereâ??s also the case where we (or our ancestors) break out of habituation to observe opportunities and threats in the landscape that really do require ***attention,*** linking with attention as explored in the previous post: Best intentions.

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Reference

- James, William. 1981. *The Principles of Psychology Volume I*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. attention
2. habit

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