Research Article

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From Habits to Rituals: Rituals as Social Habits

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Abstract: The present contribution aims at investigating the relationship between habits and rituals; they are based on the same processes even though they have different functions depending on the context (personal or social). Our discussion will mostly focus on the nature and function of rituals, as necessary practices in human and other animals' social lives. After a brief introduction of the notion of “habit” by reference to relevant studies that cross philosophy and neurobiology, we propose an interpretation of rituals as collective activity, which is based on the same mechanisms of habits formation, but it is expressed in a “We-form”, from which it is created and institutionalized¹

Keywords: Habit, Ritual, Habit Learning, Extra-ordinary Communication, I-Intentionality, We-Intentionality, Symbolization, Status-Function.

1 Introduction

The notion of “habit” is at the center of a lively philosophical debate that shows how some ideas from classical thought are still plausible and useful also for science. Following Aristotle, we can intend habits through the process of “habits learning” which is a central topic in neuroscience and neurobiology. A habit is not only a mere automatism or a repetitive behavior, but also a stable disposition for action (practical skill), which entails the relationship between automatism and flexibility implying also control. The difference between habits and automatism (or simple routines) is that the former give control over actions, while the latter do not (Bernacer, Murillo 2014; Lombo, Gimenez-Amaya; 2014). Philosophy and neurobiology can therefore be connected by the consideration of habit as “stable disposition for self-development”.

In the social sphere, habits can be shared and institutionalized in the form of rites. Habits can be viewed from an individual mode or “I-mode” because they are idiosyncratic as regards personal behavior. Each person has her own habits i.e. how to perform certain actions that become daily routines and the meaning associated with them. Habits have a very important function in individual life because they reduce the complexity of daily life; they simply make our daily life easier and pleasant. Rituals can be seen as habits in a We-mode, they present the dimension of routine but also the active stable disposition for action, which shows how rituals play a fundamental role in individual and social life. We will move from a view that crosses philosophy and neurobiology and intends habits also as a goal-directed activity. This perspective provides the ground for understanding the cooperation we need to engage and to institutionalize the ritual practice in social environments.

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2 The notion of “habit” between Philosophy and Neurobiology

In order to establish a fruitful relationship between habits and rituals, we need to grasp a plausible sense for the notion of habit, which goes beyond the mere repetitive behavior or routine. There are important characteristics of habits that allow us to understand how they can be extended to the social dimension namely as rituals. As noted by Bernacer and Murillo (2014), the explicit investigation of habits in neuroscience is quite recent. But, the fact that “we act according to our habits, from the time we rise and go through our morning routines until we fall asleep after evening routines” (Graybiel 2008) is evident. The seminal contribution is represented by the work of Anthony Dickinson (1985) who thought that habits are overtly opposed to teleological actions and identified with stimulus-response pairings. The results mostly derive from non-human research and the main difference between the two processes is that actions are outcome-oriented (sensitive to reward devaluation or extinction) and habits are guided by stimulus itself so that the outcome becomes irrelevant.

Graybiel seems to establish a fruitful relationship between habits and goals in this sense goals are explicitly present during action evolution and selection, but they increasingly blur the more an action is repeated. She proposes examples of habits as fixed action patterns namely complex repetitive behavior in non-human animals and repetitive behavior and thoughts in human pathological conditions (Graybiel 2008). The result is that habit completely disengaged from a goal becomes either a stimulus-response pair for a non-human animal or a pathological trait for human beings. Graybiel also maintains that habits play an important role in social life, as in this case they are “shaped” as mannerism and rituals. So, we find here a first possible extension of habits to the social dimension, namely how we can intend rituals as social habits. Even so, Bernacer and Murillo underscore that Graybiel does not clarify the link between the anatomical and physiological bases of habits and their social expression mostly because the majority of experiments are carried out in laboratory animals. Her theoretical contribution resides in the classification of habits as “neutral”, “good” or “bad” where good habits seem to be those choose to guide our behavior and bad habits those that powerfully take control on our behavior. They conclude that this categorization seems to leave the door open to include goals as drivers of habit: they intend “good” habits as those rationally directed to a goal, and “bad” habits as behavioral depositions to perform rigidly defined actions uncontrolled by cognitive processes.

Williams James’ notion of habit (James 1950) has strong connections with neuroscientific research, namely in the study of neurobiological foundations of motor routines, the relation of consciousness with habits, the mechanism of instrumental learning in animals, and the implication of these phenomena in human disorders. Nevertheless, because of the associationist view grounding this study, it seems far from explaining the complexity of human habits. Consequently, Bernacer and Murillo (2014) underscore three important results from a deep study of the Aristotelian analysis of habit in *Nicomachean Ethics*:

1. An acquired habit is an acquired disposition to perform certain types of actions.
2. This disposition, usually acquired by means of repetition of one or more actions, makes the exception of these actions a prompter, more spontaneous and autonomous from continuous supervision, all of which generally leads to a better performance.
3. If the habit increases cognitive control of the actions, it can be termed a habit-as-learning; on the contrary, it increases their rigidity, it is a habit-as-routine.

The authors focus on relevant contributions of the Aristotelian notion of habit to neuroscience. First, habits-as-routines are fundamental for the cognitive enrichment of actions entailed by a variable amount of practice (efforts are required to engage in activities and performances). In their analysis, habits-as-learning are not merely acquisition of a way of acting as they entail a cognitive capacity connected to the habit that can flexibly used in different contexts. For example the singer who can easily reproduce the notes (a mostly theoretical habit), and whose voice appropriately responds to the reading (a technical habit) is able to give her own interpretation. In the case of behavioral and technical habits they imply the availability of motor skills for complex activities, as well as the modulation of tendencies and desires to respond positively to conscious and rational goals. Therefore, they involve the action of habits-as-routines, but their critical

characteristics go beyond their motor aspects.

Related to first point, a second contribution resides in the different relation of habits-as-routines and habits-as-learning to consciousness. Habits-as-routines entail a fully unconscious performance. Habits-as-learning reduce or eliminate consciousness of basic elements of the action in order to concentrate on higher goals, while preserving at all times the possibility of recovering them for conscious attention. Third, it is worthy to underline the contribution of the Aristotelian distinction between good and bad habits, which characterizes good habits as those enhancing the agent's control to reach precise goals. Consequently, a fourth point clarifies the relation between habits and emotions. The habits-as-learning entail control thus they are fundamental to reach personal goals. This process favors the agent's pleasure and happiness.

As we have seen, some authors intend the idea of "habit learning" as the performance of an action, previously learned after many repetitions, in an unconscious manner, and whose execution is inflexible and independent to the outcome (Seger and Spiering, 2011; Bernácer and Giménez-Amaya, 2013). This perspective requires an integration with other perspectives that center on sensitivity to the outcome and on different levels of flexibility and feedback (Lombo and Giménez Amaya, 2013; Smith and Graybiel, 2014). According to Lombo and Giménez Amaya, a neurobiological view of "habit learning" and recent experimental contributions (especially those of Graybiel) are consistent with the philosophical concept of "habit" in human beings. Human habits are essentially based on two aspects: (a) the stable character of an acquired quality; and (b) the capacity for new actions that arises from that quality (Millán-Puelles, 2002).

3 Forms of Rituals

Before we can propose a fruitful theoretical relation between habits and rituals, what we mean by the word "ritual" must be clarified. We use the word "rite" or "ritual" mostly to refer to religion (also to myth); rituals embed the religious experience in the mystical dimension. The ritual is sociologically intended as a set of acts or normatively codified practices that form cultural patterns of a certain society. Rites and rituals represent the values and standards of the transmission function, the institutionalization of roles, identity and social cohesion. We would point to the anthropological studies of Ernesto De Martino, who stressed that the experience of the precariousness of human life (rather than natural events and therefore stereotyped behaviors) offers reassuring models to follow by building the same tradition. The sociologist Emile Durkheim analyzed the transition from the initial part of the rite to a social function which strengthens the internal community ties; as did the functionalist anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski. Contrarily, the anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and Meyer Fortes consider the primary social and cultural role of the myth that can extend later in the religious sphere.

Ritual requires deep emotional involvement; without which it ceases to exist. It also requires different aesthetic components, depending on different cultures and different times (or age); the rite must evolve to not lose its meaning. An example of the context-dependence of ritual is offered by the idiosyncratic responses people have to the sound of the pipe organ in the religious sphere of Christianity. For the Western Catholic community, organ music is perceived as the sound of power, and the pipe organ becomes a "divine" instrument. In Eastern Christianity, the same sounds have no ritual significance: musical arrangements and compositions for the pipe organ tend to lack the dissonance and cacophony that believers from the Eastern tradition associate with the divine.

1. Roy Rappaport posits six different forms of ritual:
2. Initiation rite (for example the initiation of adolescents according to cultural and religious rites, or in Freemasonry rite of passage leading to the grant of the light)
3. Rite of passage (Baptism)
4. Propitiatory and apotropaic (ancient rites to propitiate a deity)
5. Rite of atonement or atoning (animal sacrifice to appease a deity)
6. Recurring rites (ceremonies related to the time of year, such as the opening of the academic year)
7. Funeral rite

Rituals can be considered as a peculiar form of “knowledge” which possess important functions in human (and animal) life. Anthropology, ethnology, sociology, social psychology traditionally investigate them. From the philosophical perspective, Kevin Schilbrack edited a very interesting book (Schilbrack 2004), where different perspectives are considered also starting from the classical thought to analyze rituals as source of knowledge.

1. Pragmatic theory of knowledge (Rorty, Dewey, Peirce, James, Santajana, Whitehead).
2. Post-wittgensteinian philosophy (Winch, Lerner, Austin, Searle, Habermas)
3. Existentialism (Heidegger, Sartre, Bernstein, Eliade)
4. Genealogical thought (Foucault, Bordo)
5. Phenomenology (Merlau Ponty, Dreyfus, Cross)
6. Cognitive science and neuroscience (Clark, Van Gelden, Varela, Frankiel, Johnson, Graybiel)
7. Feminist epistemology (Grosz, McGuire, Butler)
8. Comparative philosophy (Sullivan, Kasulis, Law, Coakley, Clooney, Yasuo, Nagatomo).

4 Rituals as “Social Habits”

Rituals can be considered as social practices in an “institutionalized” We-mode. They serve the important function of creating social spaces in which individuals can share emotions, experiences, values, norms, and knowledge. They need human cooperation as a kind of intersubjectivity typical of human beings who, differently from apes, are able to have “Collective Intentionality” (Tomasello 2009, Habermas 2008) i.e. the basic intention to cooperate and therefore to reach together a certain goal. There is a contemporary lively debate on the nature and structure of Collective Intentionality, as necessary notion to researches in the field of social ontology (the pioneers in this area are John Searle, Raimo Tuomela, Margareth Gilbert, Michael Bratman and Philip Pettit).

4.1 Extra-ordinary communication

We-Intentionality, from the Habermasian point of view, is expressed through the use of language in different social contexts. We have two forms of normativity in social contexts: we have a “weak” normativity entailed by linguistic conventions and a “strong” normativity coming out of traditions and moral norms (Giovagnoli 2017). Rituals can be interpreted as a form of “extra-ordinary communication”, which embeds the strong normativity of the cultural background. Symbolization is not the mere embodiment of the semantic contents; it reveals the “bounding effect” produced by traditions, roles and institutions. Institutions possess an affectively and emotively bounding force that is embedded in shared obligations and collective authorizations.

Rituals possess the characteristic of auto-referentiality as they do not refer to something in the “real world.” The absence of the referent puts ritual communication in an extra-ordinary dimension:

“Let’s think of ritual as a dance. The rhythmic movements of the dance and procession express the comeuppance of intentions, where the reciprocal imitation of gestures stimulates the reciprocal exchange of perspectives and provokes, with strong evidence, the sharing of an “internal experience” (...) Evidently, the dimension in which we look for the lacking referent cannot but be that dimension of social cohabitation produced by the new evolutive stage of the symbolic communication. In other words, I intend the ritual behavior as a response to the problems created by the *socialization of individuals* on this level of communication” (Habermas 2012, p. 52).

The function of rituals is to make individual motivations shareable and to solve the conflict between individual self-affirmation and collectivity. Habermas also takes note of the dimensions of gestural communication which characterizes rituals. Gestures, from his social pragmatics perspective, are a new

form of intelligent, useful cooperation. Along the line of his post-metaphysical thinking, it is underscored by the fact that when Ego and Alter institute a common meaning they allow their individual consciousness to overcome an egocentric perspective. Participants to a dialogical situation begin to communicate across different dimensions; moving from their common life-world, and trying to cooperatively face world's contingencies,. The deep research conducted by Durkheim shows that rituals reveal their function in the re-generation of solidarity as well as in the self-thematization of the communitarian identity.

The social functions of rituals described by Habermas are based on a deep analysis of extra-ordinary communication, and make them something that generate from a collective dimension or cooperation. Consequently, we lose any account of a pattern of behavior that connects individual and social aspects of habitual behavior. Our aim is to try to isolate a process that is common to habits and rituals and this process is related to a reduction of complexity (in the Aristotelian sense it entails both routines and goal-directed activity), that characterizes individual and social ordinary life. But, to share habits in a larger environment where ritual can become public, with specific rules of behavior, that make it recognizable from people inside and out side the community, we need a third level of behavior: the process of institutionalization. The set of acts which characterizes human habits can be institutionalized to form the cultural rituals that belong to human life-forms. What we must clarify here is how this institutionalization is possible, and how it actually works. In this sense what can seem merely shared habits become “social” in a strong sense, and reinforce their function in establishing solidarity and social identity.

4.2 From “Function” to “Status Function”

We can observe that human beings (but also other species) have the capacity to impose a function to an object so that the object acquires a function dependent on the peculiar scope of the agent. The continuity between individual habits and rituals (social habits) is thus illustrated by the fact that humans create these “agentive functions” (in Searle’s terminology) in a wide variety of situations. Also non human animals have their form of creating functions for objects but there is a fundamental difference in the concept of “function” in the human case. I think that this point is clearly explained by Searle and it is worthy to be quoted for our argument:

“(…) when we discover functions in nature, what we are doing is discovering how certain causes operate to serve certain purposes where the notion of purpose is not intrinsic to mind-independent nature, but is relative to our sets of values. So, we can discover that the heart pumps blood, but when we say that the function of the heart is to pump blood, we take it for granted that life, survival, and reproduction are positive values, and that the functioning of biological organs sees these values (…) a function is a cause that serve a purpose. And the purposes have to come from somewhere; in this case, they come from human beings. In this sense, functions are intentionality-relative and therefore mind-dependent” (Searle 2010, p. 59).

In order to understand how we create social habits in the form of rituals, we must lean on the more general notion of “status function”, which is a peculiar kind of function from which we create the social world.. In this sense, they are intentionality-relative functions, but are characterized by two special features. They require (a) a shared intentionality namely “collective intentionality” and (b) collective imposition and recognition of a status.

A sort of “constitutive rule” is essential to the process of constitution of institutions in general. The canonical form introduced by Searle (1997, 2010) is:

Status Function = X counts as Y in C

For instance, a certain expression counts as promise in a certain context C. So, it is fundamental to assign functions to objects and persons. Language allows us to represent state of affairs and norms, namely to understand what are the conditions of satisfaction of different speech acts (assertions, commands, promises etc.). Beyond the classical dimensions of syntax, compositionality and generativity, there is a

fundamental dimension which generates public norms i.e. “deontology”, which is expressed by the speech act of “declaration”. For example, if I say “This is my house” or “This is my coach”, I not only represent a state of affairs, but I create a deontology which manifests itself in rights, obligations and duties as well as in the acceptance of the corresponding speech acts from the part of the interlocutors. This is the process by which a public deontology is created namely public reasons for acting that are desire-independent. Language not only describes something, but creates and “partially” constitutes what it at the same time describes and creates. Representations that are partially constitutive of institutional reality, the reality of government, private property, money, universities and cocktail parties, are essentially linguistic. What must be clarified is the sense of this “partially” constitutes, because language use works on the basis of a prelinguistic dimension which embeds background capacities such as capacity to cooperate, to act as a “We”. Moreover, this very capacity is fundamental to share and constitute rituals.

4.3 Institutional Reality and Rituals

Institutional reality in a broad sense includes non-linguistic institutions and some that are essentially linguistic. This is because we share practices that are institutions like sport institutions (football teams, equitation teams, clubs etc.), or general forms of human activity that are non *per se* institutions (science, religion, literature, cooking etc.), and professional activities that include institutions (medicine, academy, theater or law). Searle introduced a test to understand the functioning of language for the constitution of social reality: a name denotes an institution if the object that falls under that “description” acquires deontic powers (Searle 2010, p. 92). In this sense, the Catholic Church is an institution but religion is not. National Science Foundation is an institution but science is not. Private property is an institution but the car is not.

“For example, the Christian calendar would ordinarily be thought of as an institution - it was, after all, instituted - but on my definition it is not, because there is not separate deontology that can be created simply by invoking the calendar. Like the color words, the calendar provides a vocabulary for situating certain brute facts and institutional facts, but situating those facts does not create a deontology. For example, in my culture, being the 17th of January is not an institutional fact, because no special powers accrue. Being Christmas Day, on the other hand, is an institutional fact, because among other deontologies, it entitles people to a day off” (Searle 2010, p. 92).

Status Functions work to create institutional facts. There are several types of them. A famous example is the case of a tribe (group) that builds a boundary (institutional fact) by using stones (physical object). In this case, the physical object has the function of a boundary and by virtue of it people inside or outside the boundary collectively recognize its social status. In this example, we do not need language or general rules but simply to impose the Status Function Y to an object X in a context C. Obviously, language is always at work, as we need a symbolic form to represent the deontic fact to not cross the boundary and to communicate the deontic situation. There are “complex” cases like the creation of a corporation, which requires explicit rules, complex legal structures and written language. Here, we do not have a physical object to which we assign a function; rather we perform the speech act of “declaration” which creates a complex case. Why? Because the declaration of existence of a corporation entails to refer to other declarations embedded in the laws we must observe.

Until now, we described the fundamental process of assigning functions to objects or to some non-physical entities, which is a form of symbolization aiming at creating institutional reality. This process is at the basis of the institutionalization of rituals and works in every community, even though social practices in general are culturally characterized. Status Function apart, there are two other basic notions that occur in the explanation of a successful functioning and stability of social institutions. The first is “cooperation” as a “strong” form of Collective Intentionality and the second is “collective recognition” as a “weak form” of it. I think that these two forms of intentionality correspond to the notion of “flexibility”, which imply the voluntary control over our actions and to the notion of “rigidity”, which characterize the mere following rules in the sense of routinely behavior.

“For example, in an actual transition when I buy something from somebody and put money in their

hands, which they accept, we have full-blown cooperation. But in addition on this intentionality, we have prior of the transaction and continuing after the transaction an attitude toward the piece of paper of the type I am placing in the hands of the seller, that we both recognize or accept the pieces of paper as money and indeed, we accept the general institution of money as well as the institution of commerce. As a general point, institutional structures require *collective recognition* by the participants in the institution in order to function, but particular transactions within the institution require *cooperation* of the sort I have been describing” (Searle 2010, p. 57).

Similarly, we can describe a very famous example of a ritual (to which Searle often refers), namely “marriage”. First, we need to be moved to act in a certain way. We-Intentionality works when we want to do something together (we have a collective intention) so that we can cooperate to achieve our common goal. As we already anticipated, Collective Intentionality presents a weak form (collective recognition) and a strong form (cooperation). Both are crucial for rituals, in our case marriage. Now we can see how a social transition from one status to another is performed through an institutionalized ritual:

1. We have “collective recognition”, which means that the couple simply accepts the institution of marriage prior to actually getting married.
2. But, the actual marriage ceremony is an example of active cooperation, in which the couple enters in a new social situation acquiring new social statuses consequently.
3. This fact obtains by the performance of the speech act of promise.
4. The social context requires also the speech act of declaration from the part of the institutional figure who has the suitable deontic powers to celebrate the rite and to ascribe the new status to the couple.

5 Conclusion

We briefly introduced the notion of habit, which is at the basis of a lively contemporary debate. We think that a research perspective that crosses philosophy and neuroscience/neurobiology could offer some important clarification of the functioning of habits and can extend to the social sphere of rituals and their function in individual and interpersonal contexts. Habits and rituals require routines and goal-directed activity even though the context is different. Ritual requires also a kind of symbolization that can be represented in different forms: the attribution of a symbolic value to certain objects, animals and procedures. The object acquires a “status function” i.e. counts as something that can be recognized to mean something else. For instance, the ceremony to award diplomas requires the students to dress the robe which means the passage to a higher level of education and a potential access to a prestigious university. In bullfight, people assign a symbolic value to the bull and to the peculiar uniform of the toreador. Also in the case of rituals we can have “good” and “bad” practices and the recognition of them implies the agents’ control on habitual behavior (habits-as-learning) so that they can consciously choose to take part to ritual practices or to change their choices. For example, to kill a bull is not considered a good practice in every culture or for anyone (like eating lamb for Easter). Differently, to acquire a higher level of education can be generally considered a good practice. Language (written or spoken) is not always present in rituals, even though as we have seen, symbolization is required to establish a social practice like a rite. Let’s think to dance as a performance largely present in rituals. Similarly to the case of marriage, in the tea ceremony the ritual focuses on a codified set of sentences as well as on some specifically objects used to prepare tea, so that they acquire a certain value and on the meaning of the very ritual.

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