

# Preface

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The current issue of *The Journal for the Philosophy of Mind, Language and the Arts* emerges from a collaborative research context on the philosophy of habits. It is part of a wider project supported by the Italian Ministry of University, entitled *Habits (in Time) of Crisis. Conceptual Tools for Dealing with Disruptive Events* (PRIN 2022), and is situated among the numerous scholarly activities carried out by the Interuniversity Centre for Habit Studies, known as PhilHabits.<sup>1</sup> It is within this context that the idea of revisiting the so-called double law of habits first emerged. Let us now turn to the project's background and briefly discuss this concept.

The idea of reconsidering this subject originally arose from a conversation between the authors of this preface and the editors of the current issue. The comparison of different viewpoints and theoretical frameworks revealed that such an exchange can generate crises - large or small - in our habitual ways of thinking, and that these crises can be potentially productive. One of us was attempting to use Dewey's notion of intelligent habit as a conceptual tool for interpreting artistic practices and sought the other's assistance, given his expertise in the history of the concept of habit in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

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**1** See: <https://philhabits.org/en/home/>.



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Our dialogue centered on the relationship between habits and intelligence as sensitivity to environmental cues, stemming from John Dewey's distinction between routine habits and intelligent habits, as presented in *Human Nature and Conduct* (Dewey 1988). In a nutshell, it is the law

according to which habit, through repetition or practice, weakens passive sensations, to which we gradually become accustomed, while strengthening our active judgements, but at the same time removes our reactions, whether motor or mental, from the sphere of attention, making them spontaneous or automatic and therefore easier and less tiring, and thus transforming them into inclinations or tendencies (Piazza 2019, 63)

that are, moreover, reversible, i.e. subject to the intervention of control. In other words, the double law of habit asserts that the continuous repetition of an action over time produces a twofold effect: on one hand, it improves the fluidity and ease of action; on the other, it weakens the impression of the stimulus eliciting the habitual response. If we assume Dewey's concept of intelligent habits is correct, however, the double law of habits appears not to fit such habits, insofar as "intelligent or artistic habits seem to combine fluid movements with a stronger awareness of the features of the material, the audience, and the complex situation with which they are interacting" (Dreon 2024, 145). In the case of flexible, intelligent habits, it seems that they involve an increased sensitivity to the environment rather than a decrease in perceptual subtlety. This is not a form of generalized enhancement of sensitivity, such as the one produced by certain drugs, but a "special sensitiveness or accessibility of a certain class of stimuli, standing predilections and aversions" (Dewey 1988, 32) - a kind of selectively oriented augmented attention and interest, channelled through habits.

A second issue emerging in subsequent meetings and workshops involving our larger research groups was that the so-called double law apparently assumes the standard picture of habits as deriving from the mechanical repetition of stimulus-response connections. It also relies on the idea that perception and action are primarily independent phases of conduct, originally linked through an intelligent, voluntary act and then connected through mechanical habitualization. This view is problematic in current debates and has been questioned by different philosophical approaches throughout the twentieth century, as well as more recently. Within Classical Pragmatism, the key reference is John Dewey's 1896 essay *The Reflex-Arc Concept in Psychology*, where he argues that the familiar stimulus-response sequence is not a scientific account of behaviour, but rather stems from a dualistic philosophical framework. By splitting experience

into distinct passive and active components, this outlook creates a “disarticulated psychology”. The resulting theoretical framework must artificially link a purely perceptual external stimulus with a motor response originating within the subject, relying on a mental coordination (Dewey 1972). Within the phenomenological tradition, Maurice Merleau-Ponty famously challenged the allegedly linear pattern of behavior in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, arguing that perception is primarily guided by the possibility of grasping (*zeigen*) (Merleau-Ponty 2002) and involves movement as an intrinsic feature (“*Wahrnehmen ist sich Bewegen*” [Perceiving is moving], cf. Merleau-Ponty 2003). More recently, post-cognitivist trends in the philosophy of mind – particularly Enactivism and so-called Ecological Theory – have strongly criticized the representational view of perception and defended the claim that perception involves full-fledged, dynamic embodiment and goal-oriented action (cf. Gibson 1979; Noë 2004; Gallagher 2017).

Consequently, we concluded that a historical and fine-grained conceptual analysis of the double law was needed and could prove useful even in current debates. As readers will hopefully appreciate, the papers collected in this issue of the journal display an interesting variety of vocabularies, reflecting the different formulations of the so-called double law of habit (including, at times, “law of habit”, “law of habits”, or even “triple law”) as well as the diversity of authors examined. Key conceptual terms reappear with different functions and nuances: perception, impression, and action, passive and active habits, intelligence, sensitivity, training, and so on. The result is a complex picture that cannot easily be reduced to uniform classifications. It does not offer single, definitive answers to our initial questions, but rather helps us to reconsider them beyond easy simplifications.

This investigation begins with an examination of the first and fundamental building blocks of the double law of habit, which can be traced back to Aristotle. His philosophy of habit and repetition is the focus of two articles in this issue. Addressing the relationship between habit, choice, and action within Aristotelian moral reflection, Francesca Masi compares the various interpretations proposed to date regarding the complex relationship between habituation (*ethos*) and habit (*hexis*), the latter understood as a disposition permanently acquired through training or exercise. The result is a well-balanced interpretation that steers clear of any form of determinism, while preserving the character of Aristotelian virtue as a habitual practice. Giulia Mingucci reaches similar conclusions in her analysis of the role played by the reiteration of perceptual traces (*phantasmata*) in guiding our epistemic and practical engagement with reality. Human behaviour, she argues, is not guided solely by *phantasia*, as is the case with other more complex animals, but also by a rational control

mechanism capable of disapproving what is proposed by the representation of perceptual traces, even when these are accompanied by pleasure.

Moving into the century that saw the first codification of the double law of habit by Joseph Butler (1736), Catherine Dromelet presents a triadic version of the law, which she reconstructs in the thought of David Hartley, particularly in his *Observations on Man* (1749). As feelings weaken and the capacity for action increases, there emerges a redirection of intention which – although used by Hartley in a super-empirical and mystical framework – is presented by Dromelet as a potentially valuable response to the challenges posed by contemporary social fragmentation. In his contribution, which brings us into the nineteenth century, Marco Piazza reconstructs in full the rich formulation of the double law of habit contained in Maine de Biran's *Mémoires sur l'influence de l'habitude* (1801-1802), demonstrating that it includes all the elements found in what has traditionally been considered the most complete formulation of the double law, namely that of Ravaisson (1838). In this work, Maine de Biran identifies three types of habits: to those of sensitivity and judgment – typical of the standard formulation of the double law – he adds habits of imagination, which, however, constitute an exception to the double law itself, thereby yielding a more flexible theory than that of Ravaisson. Alice Morelli identifies in William James' philosophy of habit a further step toward redefining the double law of habit, in light of the increasingly complex and articulated conceptual developments spanning the period from Butler to Ravaisson. The "laws of habit", to use James' own expression, reproduce a dialectic only partially analogous to that of the classical double law, since the effect of habit is not a weakening of sensation or a disappearance of conscious attention. Rather, it involves a difference in degrees associated with an increase in the plasticity of neural pathways – an idea that resonates with contemporary approaches in 4E Cognition.

Elena Valeri focuses on the relationship between practices, learning, and training in Wittgenstein. Starting from the idea found in the *Philosophical Investigations* that every human activity corresponds to a custom learned through training, Valeri offers several clarifications. On the one hand, she highlights the limitations of training, whose outcomes are always variable because they are shaped by both our individual and our species-specific nature. On the other hand, she shows that training involves not only obedience to a rule but also a kind of "feeling for the rules" which consists in knowing when a rule must be modified or even abandoned.

Starting from the notion of spontaneity implicit in the double law of habit, Sofia Sandreschi de Robertis highlights two different conceptions of habit that emerge in French philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century. In the first, habit is understood essentially

as a form of repetition that inevitably tends toward a mechanical and passive configuration. In the second, by contrast, emphasis is placed on the relational dimension of habit, thereby freeing it from the stigma of mechanistic automatism. Habit thus becomes a concept with broader contours, capable of addressing the concerns of more recent reflections on the topic.

An excerpt from *The Principles of Moral Philosophy* by George Turnbull, published in 1740, concludes the issue. This text seemed particularly appropriate to accompany the monographic dossier on the double law of habit, as it contains the earliest known occurrence of the expression *Law of Habits*.

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