

Articoli/5

The Dark Side of Habits

A Pragmatist Account

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Articolo sottoposto a doppia *blind peer review*. Inviato il 28/12/2020. Accettato il 09/03/2021

This paper aims at discussing the pragmatist contributions to the understanding of the dark side of habits, i.e., those features of habits which tend to hinder the intelligent reconstruction of our relations with ourselves, with others, and with the world. My hypothesis is that pragmatists provided interesting insights into these problematic aspects of habits. The structure of this paper aims at developing and discussing this hypothesis. In section 1, I will present Dewey's theory of habits as an attempt to integrate James' and Peirce's contributions to the topic. In section 2, I will discuss the complicated relation between pragmatism and the unconscious, by analyzing Peirce's (2.1) and Dewey's (2.2) contributions to this subject. In section 3, I will discuss a second element of complication in the mainstream representation of pragmatist's theory of habits: inertia. Specifically, I will try to show how Dewey was fully aware of the role that stiffened habits play in political and social crises and conflicts. In the conclusions, I will summarize the results of the discussions.

Introduction

The concept of habit has played a major role in the recent revival of pragmatism in philosophy and in the social sciences¹. The reasons for the concept's central role in this resurgence are easy to see. Pragmatists' focus on habit enabled them to outline a theory of human action which relies neither on hyper-intellectual approaches, nor on understanding human behavior in terms of pure automatisms². It is no overstatement to argue that habit is at the center of pragmatism's quest to overcome a variety of dichotomies: biological/cultural;

¹ See for instance R. Dreon, *Human Landscapes. Contributions to a Pragmatist Anthropology*, Manuscript 2021; I. Testa and F. Caruana (eds.) *Habits: Pragmatist Approaches from Cognitive Science, Neuroscience, and Social Theory*, Cambridge 2020. For an interesting historical and theoretical account, see E. Kilpinen, *The Enormous Fly-wheel of Society: Pragmatism's Habitual Conception of Action and Social Theory*, Helsinki 2000.

² See H. Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, Chicago 1996.

intellectual/affective; mind/body; thought/action. Of course, classical pragmatists sometimes differed widely on this subject. To put it schematically, Charles S. Peirce conceived of habit primarily in a logical and cosmological sense; William James focused primarily on the psychological and physiological dimensions, while John Dewey and George Herbert Mead primarily emphasized its pragmatic and social dimensions. Despite these significant differences, pragmatists agree on a point of great importance: placing habits at the core of our understanding of human action means emphasizing the importance of the pre-reflective dimension of experience without downplaying the importance of intelligence and reflexivity. The idea that «thinking is secreted in the interstices of habits»³ does not intend to totally discard rationality in favor of the irrational factors in human behavior. Instead, it aims to pinpoint exactly how reflexivity works and what it means. We become reflective when a rupture occurs in our habits. Or more precisely: intelligent reflection is the potential consequence of just such a rupture. This means that constant reflective and conscious attention to all the interactions with the environment and with others that constitute our habits is not a sign of intelligence, but of inability to act. The fact that a habit functions largely pre-reflectively does not mean that it is itself irrational. Rather, intelligence is identified in the ability to detect a crisis in the habit, and to reconstruct a new habit following that rupture⁴.

However, the pattern ‘pre-reflective habits; rupture; intelligence; reconstruction’ seems blind to the hiccups and impediments that characterize our social lives. It is not hard to imagine situations in which our habits seem to constitute insurmountable obstacles to our conscious intents and more reflective desires. In some cases, we repeat the same mistakes proactively, that is, through an unwitting but active search for situations which, upon reflection, are seen to produce in us the very unpleasant consequences that we would ostensibly like to avoid. In such cases, our habits seem to resist our attempts at intelligent reconstruction. This begs the question: *can pragmatism account for this ‘dark side’ of our habits, i.e. those features which tend to hinder the intelligent and reflective reconstruction of our relations with ourselves, with others, and with the world?* Or does their emphasis on processes of change and reconstruction constrict them to a naive and unrealistic optimism?

³ LW2, p. 335 [I will refer to Dewey’s work according to the standard style of reference – e.g., LW2 means here: John Dewey, *The Later Works*, vol. 12, Carbondale].

⁴ In this passage, the pragmatist position has been presented using Dewey’s terminology. Quite similar considerations can be found, however, in Peirce’s critique of Cartesian absolute doubt, which he defines as an unreal form of doubt, a paper doubt: «Do you call it doubting to write down on a piece of paper that you doubt? If so, doubt has nothing to do with any serious business» (CP 4.516). I will refer to Peirce’s writings according to the standard style of reference. CP means here *Collected Papers*]. As Kilpinen aptly pointed out, the importance of the pre-reflective dimension of habits does not entail the impossibility of largely reflective and intelligent habits, which is explicitly acknowledged by Peirce. See E. Kilpinen, *In What Sense Exactly Is Peirce’s Habit-Concept Revolutionary?*, in D. E. West, M. Anderson (eds.), *Consensus on Peirce’s Concept of Habit: Before and Beyond Consciousness*, Berlin 2016, p. 202.

In this article, I will address this issue in three steps. In section 1, I will discuss Dewey's theory of habits as an attempt to critically engage with the contributions of his two pragmatist forerunners, namely William James and Charles Sanders Peirce. In section 2, I will attempt to understand in what sense pragmatists define habits as pre-reflective. To this end, I will draw on the Freudian distinction between pre-conscious and unconscious. In his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Sigmund Freud distinguished between pre-conscious thoughts, which are «easily, under frequently occurring circumstances, transformed into something conscious», and unconscious thoughts, whose transformation to consciousness «is difficult and takes place only subject to a considerable expenditure of effort or possibly never at all»⁵. Within the framework of this distinction, I will focus on the pragmatist tendency to view habits as pre-reflective (in the sense of being preconscious). Although we may not be perfectly aware of every step involved in our habitual actions, we may become effortlessly conscious of them if someone drew our attention to a specific aspect of our behavior. At the same time, in the works of the pragmatists – in particular Dewey and Peirce – we also find insights about the unconscious character of habits. These insights show how from a pragmatist perspective, the pre-reflective nature of habits can sometimes be the effect of deep intra and interpsychic conflicts, and is not simply the temporary effect of the need to make our interaction with the environment as fluid and smooth as possible.

In section 3 I will discuss the inertia of habits, which constitutes an additional drag on their intelligent reconstruction. By inertia of habits I mean their tendency to survive in situations that make them obsolete. As I will try to show, Dewey was fully aware of the role that stiffened habits play in political and social crises and conflicts. This inertial tendency represents a complicating and problematic factor in what he identifies as one of the main tasks of social and political action, namely the reconstruction of new habits. Accordingly, his emphasis on transformative processes and the role of intelligence acknowledges the resistance that some habits present to such transformations.

In the conclusions, I will summarize the results of the discussions put forth in the previous paragraphs. My thesis is that pragmatists were surely aware of the *dark side of habits*. Their insights in this regard clearly acknowledge the ambiguous and problematic nature of habits, and how the pragmatist perspective can in no way be reduced to the optimistic assumption that habits *can always be* intelligently reconstructed.

1. Pre-reflective and yet not automatic. Dewey's theory of habits

In recent years, Dewey's theory of habits has gained increasing attention in at least two areas in which we are seeing a strong resurgence of interest in

⁵ S. Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, London 1964, p. 103.

pragmatism today: the cognitive sciences and social philosophy⁶. Of course, his perspective does not fully encompass the richness and the variety of pragmatist ideas and theories on this topic. At the same time, it is possible to think of his theory as being representative of the pragmatist conception of habits in a very restricted and specific sense. On a theoretical level, it is indeed possible to reconstruct Dewey's conception of habit as an attempt to critically systematize the contributions of two leading figures of pragmatism: William James and Charles Sanders Peirce. His discussion of James and Peirce's theories allows us to highlight some important features of Dewey's concept of habits: respectively, their relational and plastic character, and their (pre)dispositional and triadic nature.

In the existing literature, James is correctly presented as having introduced the idea of the plasticity of habits. The plastic character of our neuronal endowment makes it impossible to conceive human action in terms of totally innate and fixed automatisms. This plasticity leaves room not only for the action of the will (a theme extremely dear to James)⁷, but also for the continuous relationship between organism and environment. Consequently, in James' understanding, habits are not rigid and automatic patterns of behavior; rather, they are relatively stable patterns of relations.

Starting from his early essays, Dewey rephrases James' statement by emphasizing the relational nature of habits. This emerges from his 1896 paper on the reflex arc concept⁸. Here, Dewey foreshadows his understanding of habits as patterns of relation between organism and environment.

This relation does not merely connect discrete pre-existing elements – e.g., stimulus and response – but rather it shapes their nature from within. His idea is that stimulus and response are not isolated entities. Rather, they are part of a relation which he calls the «organic circuit». This means that: 1) responses contribute to the selection and the definition of the stimulus; 2) the stimulus may tend to elicit certain responses rather than others. When this relation is interrupted, a conscious and explicit attention towards the stimulus and/or the response emerges. When explicitly applied to the concept of habit, this relational idea has momentous consequences. Habit becomes the main character of Dewey's mature social psychology, developed in *Human Nature and Conduct*. The idea of discrete and totally pre-determined instincts is explicitly rejected, to be replaced by the idea of impulses interacting with habitual schema of interaction with others. In the wake of George Herbert Mead⁹, Dewey prefers the vocabulary of impulses to that of instincts precisely because the former leave more room

⁶ F. Gregoratto, A. Särkelä, *Social Reproduction Feminism and Deweyan Habit Ontology*, in I. Testa, F. Caruana (eds.), *Habits*, cit.; R. Dreon, *Human Landscapes*, cit.

⁷ See H. Joas, *The Genesis of Values*, Chicago 2000, pp. 35-53. On habits and plasticity, see Michela Bella's contribution to this Symposium.

⁸ *EW5*, pp. 96-111.

⁹ G. Baggio, *La mente bio-sociale. Filosofia e psicologia in G.H. Mead*, Pisa 2015; H. Joas, *G. H. Mead: A Contemporary Re-examination of His Thought*, Cambridge 1985.

for plasticity than the latter. Impulses are potentially molded by our habitual practices, and in turn our established habits can be challenged by unpredictable impulses. To sum up: The relation between Dewey and James on the topic of habits is thus a dialectical intellectual filiation, in which the successor elaborates on and further develops some sketched intuitions of his predecessor.

Things are more complicated when it comes to the relation between Dewey and Peirce, where we apparently face deeper, more substantial differences. While Peirce's theory of habits is strongly based on his anti-psychologist logic, Dewey's approach is mainly pragmatic and ecological, as it understands habits as forms of transaction between organism and environment. Consequently, from Peirce's point of view, Dewey's conception of habits drifts dangerously close to the forbidden realm of the psychologistic approach – see for instance his annoyed private and public reactions to Dewey's 1903 edited volume *Studies in Logical Theory*¹⁰. Despite these important methodological differences, some remarks need to be made. First, even on the most controversial topic of conversation between Dewey and Peirce, i.e., logic, there is room for ambiguity. While from a Peircean standpoint, Dewey's logic seems excessively focused on actual organic processes (betraying an alleged psychologistic approach), Dewey's mature theory of logical rules as extremely general habits of inferences is quite clearly inspired by Peirce¹¹. Second, while not adopting his terminology, Dewey would agree with Peirce about the triadic nature of habits. As he stated in his 1896 essay on the organic circuit, Dewey refuses to adopt the dyadic schema of stimulus-response as an apt representation of psychological phenomena. Dyadic relations are approximated representations of contextual phenomena – e.g., the rupture of the coordination organism-environment – and should not be seen as a general schema with which to interpret psychological processes. Dewey's claim about the primacy of coordination over its elements can be clearly rephrased in Peirce's philosophical vocabulary by arguing that habits are triadic:

by a Habit I shall mean a character of anything, say of B, this character consisting in the fact that under circumstances of a certain kind, say A, B would tend to be such as is signified by a determinate predicate, say C. The same thing might be more briefly expressed by saying that I call any real 'would-be' a habit of the subject of such predication; but by stating the matter more fully I bring into prominence the fact that a 'would-be' is a relation between three objects, A, B, and C¹².

¹⁰ The reactions are described and commented in V. Colapietro, *Experimental logic: Normative theory or natural history?*, in F. T. Burke, D. Micah Hester, R. B. Talisse (eds.), *Dewey's Logical Theory: New Studies and Interpretations*, Nashville 2002, pp. 43-46.

¹¹ The topic of the affinities and divergences between Peirce's and Dewey's logic is a debated one. Larry Hickman and Ralph Sleeper highlighted the discontinuities between Peirce's normative approach to logic and Dewey's empirical and naturalistic one – see for instance L. Hickman, *Why Peirce Didn't Like Dewey's Logic*, «Southwest Philosophy Review», 3, 1986, pp. 178-189. While acknowledging the discontinuities between the two perspectives, Vincent Colapietro also emphasized the continuities and the dialectic debate on this issue between the two authors. See V. Colapietro, *Experimental logic: Normative theory or natural history?*, pp. 43-71.

¹² C. S. Peirce, *A Harvard manuscript. Charles S. Peirce Papers, 1787-1951*, MS Am 1632, Houghton Library, Harvard University) as listed in Richard Robin, *Annotated Catalogue of the*

But does this quote entail that Peirce has a dispositional understanding of habits? If yes, then this would be a point of disagreement with Dewey. Dewey refuses to think of habits as dispositions in the strong sense of the term – e.g., as inactive dispositions waiting to be activated by an external stimulus¹³. While this refusal is uncontroversial, a brief conceptual clarification could be of help here. Dewey concedes that we can understand habits as dispositions, but only if we understand the term ‘disposition’ in the sense of predispositions, i.e., as something «operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity». In this very specific sense, habits as dispositions are not latent, but rather «they denote positive forms of action which are released merely through removal of some-counteracting inhibitory tendency, and then become overt»¹⁴. Habits are patterns of organization and re-organization of the practices, the ideas and feelings of an organism in action. In this way, Dewey preserves Peirce’s claim about the irreducibility of habits to actual occurrences of action, without falling into dispositionalism¹⁵. Dewey’s most precise and developed definition of habits in his *Human Nature and Conduct* makes this clear:

The essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to *ways* or modes of response, not to particular acts except as, under special conditions, these express a way of behaving. Habit means special sensitiveness or accessibility to certain classes of stimuli, standing predilections and aversions, rather than bare recurrence of specific acts. It means will¹⁶.

Like Peirce, Dewey believes that generality is «embodied in habits», and that the concept of habit «explains the creation of general regularities out of particular elements»¹⁷. At the same time, Dewey seems to be more concerned than Peirce in distinguishing habits from dispositions, whereas these are understood as something existing only latently. According to his perspective, we can understand dispositions as «subdued, non-patent»¹⁸ forms of habits only by conceiving of them (dispositions) in terms of «a potential energy needing only

Papers of Charles S. Peirce, Amherst 1967, pp. 20-22. I found this quote, together with an interesting discussion of the triadic nature of habits and their mediating function in S. Bernardi della Rosa, *From Pragmatic Maxim to Habit. A Theoretical and Methodological Framework through Peirce and Bourdieu*, in M. Festl (ed.), *Pragmatism and Social Philosophy Exploring a Stream of Ideas from America to Europe*, London-New York 2020. For a general discussion about Peirce’s concept of habit, see D. E. West, M. Anderson (eds.), *Consensus on Peirce’s Concept of Habit*, cit.

¹³ R. Dreon, *Human Landscapes*, cit.; L. Quéré, *Bourdieu et le pragmatisme américain sur la créativité de l’habitude*, Occasional Paper 37 Paris 2016.

¹⁴ MW14, p. 32.

¹⁵ With this caveat, it is possible to agree with Kilpinen’s contention that pragmatists generally conceive of habits as dispositions. See E. Kilpinen, *Habit, Action, and Knowledge, from the Pragmatist Perspective. Action, Belief and Inquiry*, in U. Zackariasson (ed.), *Pragmatist Perspectives on Science, Society and Religion*, Helsinki 2015, pp. 155-173.

¹⁶ MW14, p. 32.

¹⁷ T. Viola, *Habit and the Symbolic Process*, in S. Marienberg (ed.), *Symbolic Articulation: Image, Word and Body between Action and Schema*, Berlin-Boston 2017, p. 93.

¹⁸ MW14, p. 32.

opportunity to become kinetic and overt»¹⁹, of «predisposition, readiness to act overtly in a specific fashion whenever opportunity is presented, this opportunity consisting in removal of the pressure due to the dominance of some overt habit»²⁰.

Through his critical engagement with Peirce's and James' theories, thus Dewey develops the idea that habits are plastic and relational, and that this relationality cannot be traced down to a dyadic structure – e.g., stimulus-response. More specifically, habits are acquired and active patterns of transactions between organism and environment. These transactions are both biological and social. Again aligning with Mead, Dewey does not understand the sociality of habits in terms of a passive internalization of social structures. Rather, habits are «ways of using and incorporating the environment in which the latter has its say as sure as the former»²¹. Habits are not merely schema of response that can be univocally localized in the organism. Rather, they are schemas or relations *between* organisms and environment, where the expression *between* is not to be taken metaphorically: our habits cannot be exclusively located in ourselves, as long as they require a constitutive «cooperation of organism and the environment»²².

But the fact that habits are transactional – they are neither properties of the organism, nor of the environment – and that they require cooperation on both sides of the relation does not mean that this relation is always cooperative and peaceful. Sometimes the relation is disrupted, and this disruption produces a crisis of the habit. According to Dewey, crises are extremely important factors in the biological and social life of habits. While habits usually work «below direct consciousness»²³, a crisis opens the path to conscious attention and to reflexivity. As Dreon puts it, habits «largely work on a pre-reflective, non-conscious and pre-conceptual level, although they are not opposed to cognition»²⁴. When a problematic situation interrupts the flow of social transactions, reflexivity emerges: the possibility of the development of a new habit arises. But what does «pre-reflective» and «below direct consciousness» mean in this context? Do pragmatists believe that reflective intelligence automatically stems from the rupture of the pre-reflective attunement between organism and environment? Can their theoretical model account for situations in which habits seems to resist the activity of intelligence? In what follows, I will delve deeper into the pragmatist understanding of these issues, by borrowing some conceptual resources from Freudian psychoanalysis.

¹⁹ *MW14*, p. 34.

²⁰ *MW14*, p. 32.

²¹ *MW14*, p. 15.

²² *MW14*, p. 15.

²³ *MW14*, p. 26.

²⁴ R. Dreon, *Human Landscapes*, cit.

2. Pragmatism and the unconscious: a complicated relation

As widely recognized in both the scientific literature and common sense, the discovery of a psychic realm external to consciousness is one of the hallmark insights contained within Sigmund Freud's thought. Equally well known, at least in scientific circles, is Freud's idea that there are two senses in which psychic content can be non-conscious. In the first sense, we say that a representation is pre-conscious if the subject is temporarily unaware of it, but there is no major obstacle preventing such content from becoming an object of consciousness. As Laplanche and Pontalis argue, pre-conscious content is implicitly present in our mind, although it may not yet constitute the actual object of our consciousness²⁵. For instance, in this specific moment I am not conscious of what I have eaten yesterday for dinner, and yet I could recall it without major efforts. On the contrary, the characterization of a representation as unconscious requires stricter conditions. More specifically, in the case of an unconscious representation, the access to consciousness is blocked by resistances and censorships. The most emblematic example in this sense is repressed thought – i.e., contents which have been 'pushed' into the unconscious due to their ability to generate strong psychic conflict and displeasure. Although they push to re-enter consciousness, psychic resistance ensures that they can re-emerge only in a masked and censored form, or by indirectly contributing to the genesis of symptoms²⁶. Unlike pre-conscious content, unconscious content cannot become the object of our consciousness at will.

This distinction introduced by Freud can help us to analyze the pragmatist conception of habits in a more detailed way. The key question will be: *Do pragmatists believe that habits are pre-reflective exclusively in the sense of being pre-conscious? Or do they acknowledge the existence of unconscious habits?*

There is little doubt that pragmatists believe that habits are usually pre-reflective in the sense of being partially pre-conscious. Although habits often do not require us to be conscious of every single phase of the transaction, there is nothing which prevents us from becoming conscious of them. A restaurant owner has formed a habit of welcoming her customers with a warm smile and making them feel cozy. While she performs these actions, she is not constantly aware of what she is doing – 'Ok, now I'm smiling. Now I am asking where they are from. Now I am helping them choose the best table...'. Indeed, the fluidity and the spontaneity of her gestures would be lost if her actions were fully conscious. Now this restaurant owner is also an excellent guitarist. As a skilled musician, she is accustomed to playing blues songs with a specific mood, using certain scales rather than others. This habit is not the sum of almost infinite micro-decisions taken in a fully conscious manner. Rather, it is the outcome of her taste, of hard practice and intensive listening sessions. In neither case is there

²⁵ J. Laplanche, J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, London 1973, p. 326.

²⁶ S. Freud, *The Unconscious* (1915), in Id., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XIV, London 1957, p. 161.

anything that prevents her from becoming aware that she is smiling, or that she is using that specific scale with that specific chord.

On the contrary, pragmatists do not seem to be very keen on the unconscious. James' criticism of the classical theory of consciousness brought him emphasize the importance of making habitual what we usually do in a reflective way:

The great thing, then, in all education, is to *make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy*. It is to fund and capitalize our acquisitions, and live at ease upon the interest of the fund. *For this we must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can*, and guard against the growing into ways that are likely to be disadvantageous to us, as we should guard against the plague. The more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their own proper work²⁷.

And yet, this emphasis on the pre-reflective nature of habits did not bring him to embrace the unconscious. Rather, James explicitly rejected this concept, in favor of the concept of subconscious²⁸. Some decades later, Mead agreed with some aspects of Freud's theory, specifically with the idea that the self is constituted through a process of internalization of our relations with the other. Still, he did not endorse the idea of the existence of repressed non-linguistic representations which influence human behavior from behind the scenes of our conscious life²⁹. Generally speaking, pragmatists seem to articulate a theory of pre-reflective (in Freud's jargon: pre-conscious) experiences, but they do not have much to say about the unconscious. The pragmatist theory of habits well exemplifies this attitude: habits are pre-reflective, in the sense that they often work below the threshold of conscious attention. Yet, they are not unconscious, insofar as they do not involve the blockage of our conscious and reflective access to habits by processes such as repression. But does it follow that pragmatists totally dismiss the possibility of even partially unconscious habits?

3.1. Peirce and the unconscious

Curiously enough, the pragmatist thinker most open to a theory of (at least partially) unconscious habits was Peirce, despite frequent criticism for upholding an intellectualistic understanding of habits. Peirce's references to the unconscious are scattered, and yet quite significant. First, in his view, the realm of the psychical cannot be reduced to the realm of consciousness: «Most of us are

²⁷ W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, New York 1890, reprint Cambridge (MA) 1981, p. 122.

²⁸ For a detailed discussion of this issue, see V. Colapietro, *James's Rejection of the Unconscious: A Fallacious Disavowal?*, manuscript, 2020.

²⁹ On the relation between Mead and psychoanalysis, see M. Santarelli, *From Others to the Other: A Psychoanalytical Reading of George Herbert Mead*, in F. T. Burke, K. P. Skowronski (eds.), *George Herbert Mead in the Twenty-First Century*, Lanham 2013.

in the habit of thinking that consciousness and psychic life are the same thing and otherwise [we] greatly overrate the functions of consciousness»³⁰. Here we might see a classical pragmatist reference to the preconscious nature of habits, one stated along similar lines here: «Consciousness subsides as habit becomes established, and is excited again at the breaking up of habit»³¹. Or again: «For if psychology were restricted to phenomena of consciousness, the establishment of mental associations, the taking of habits, which is the very market-place of psychology, would be outside its boulevard»³². As Vincent Colapietro noted³³, these quotations, while effectively referring to nonconscious phenomena, do not necessarily deal with the unconscious, but rather with generic pre-reflective – viz pre-conscious – processes.

However, in other passages, Peirce seems less ambiguous in his interest in the unconscious. In his often-quoted metaphor of consciousness as a «bottomless lake», Peirce elaborates his intuition by writing that «in this water there are countless objects of different depths; and certain influences will give certain kinds of those objects an upward impulse which may be intense enough and continue long enough to bring them into the upper visible layer. After the impulse ceases, they commence to sink downward»³⁴. And even more explicitly, in this passage Peirce acknowledges also the motivating force of unconscious drives: «Men many times fancy that they act from reason when, in point of fact, the reasons they attribute to themselves are nothing but excuses which unconscious instinct invents to satisfy the teasing ‘whys’ of the ego. The extent of this self-delusion is such as to render philosophical rationalism a farce. Reason, then, appeals to sentiment in the last resort»³⁵.

How should we interpret these passages? Should we minimize their import, by saying that what we have is simply a terminological coincidence (Peirce uses the word ‘unconscious’, but in fact he means something far more similar to Freud’s pre-conscious)? Or could we hypothesize that these references hint at a Peircean theory of the unconscious, or even at a theory of unconscious habits?

Colapietro thoroughly explored this latter hypothesis through his discussion with Teresa De Lauretis³⁶. The discussion focuses on the possibility of interpreting unconscious habits through the use of the concept of the logical interpretant. Specifically, Colapietro agrees with De Lauretis that logical interpretants as defined by Peirce consist in establishing a habit change, and that habit changes also includes changes in feelings, imagination and bodily experiences. Also,

³⁰ CP 6.489.

³¹ CP 6.614.

³² CP 7.367.

³³ V. Colapietro, *Notes for a Sketch of a Peircean Theory of the Unconscious*, «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 31, 1995 (3), pp. 482-506. This whole paragraph is largely based on Colapietro’s works on Peirce’s theory of the unconscious.

³⁴ CP 7.547.

³⁵ CP 1.631-2.

³⁶ T. De Lauretis, *Gender, Body and Habit Change*, in J. Muller, J. Brent (eds.), *Peirce, Semiotics and Psychoanalysis*, Baltimore and London 2000.

Colapietro agrees with De Lauretis that the results of this semiotic work might be the development of unconscious habits. Moreover, Colapietro adds that some of these habits seem to be characterized by an unpleasant feature. He refers here to «instinctual tendencies and acquired habits that block the formation of ever more flexible, nuanced habits of feeling, acting and imagining»³⁷, and which generate self-frustrating or self-destructive habits³⁸. Neurotic habits are a clear instance of this kind of habit.

Logical interpretants may then produce unconscious habits – e.g., the habits constituting our gender identity, as highlighted by De Lauretis – but some of these unconscious habits consist in deeply blocking, irrational and self-destructive tendencies. This begs the question: can the logical interpretant be considered a source of such irrational habits? How is it possible to conceive of a logical and yet irrational interpretant, given Peirce's frequent references to the fact that a logical interpretant produces habit change in a deliberate and conscious way?

Colapietro addresses these issues by introducing a conceptual distinction. Specifically, he does so by referring to two different Peircean classifications of the interpretants. On the one hand, Peirce distinguished emotive, energetic and logical interpretants. Besides this classification, there is a further one, according to which interpretants could be defined as immediate, dynamic and final. According to Colapietro, these two classifications do not completely overlap³⁹. Specifically, a logical interpretant may not be a final interpretant. This is exactly the case of the previously mentioned unconscious habits. These habits are the outcome of a kind of interpretant which «in some respects enjoys the status of a truly ultimate logical interpretant but that in other respects fails to be a 'deliberately formed, self – analyzing habit' (CP 5.491)»⁴⁰. Neurotic behaviors and schema of thought appear to be highly correlated with these logical, but only quasi-final interpretants: «Any habit that would arrest or, worse, destroy opportunities for cultivating deliberately formed, self-analyzing habits, but which would do so in its role as quasi-final interpretant, would have a very important status within the economy of our psychic lives»⁴¹. In order to understand certain kinds of unconscious habits, Colapietro then proposes to introduce the more detailed notion of the logical quasi-final interpretant. Logicity consists here in

³⁷ V. Colapietro, *Further Consequences of a Singular Capacity*, in J. Muller, J. Brent (eds), *Peirce, Semiotics and Psychoanalysis*, Baltimore and London 2000, p. 145.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 144.

³⁹ There has been a long debate concerning the possibility of singling out two different classifications of interpretants in Peirce's work. On this topic, see T. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, Cambridge 2007; B. L. Lalor, *The Classification of Peirce's Interpretants*, «Semiotica», 114, 1997 (1-2), pp. 31-40; J. K. Liszka, *Peirce's Interpretant* «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 26, 1990 (1), pp. 17-62; F. Bellucci, *Peirce's Speculative Grammar. Logic as Semiotics*, New York 2018. For the purposes of this paper, I will assume the difference between logical interpretant and final interpretant, without directly entering into the debate.

⁴⁰ V. Colapietro, *Further Consequences of a Singular Capacity*. *Peirce, Semiotics and Psychoanalysis*, p. 138.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 146.

the establishment of a highly constant and stable habit of action; the lack of finality consists in the absence of a full conscious and reflective control.

Colapietro's hypothesis according to which unconscious habits such as those characterizing neurotic behaviors are correlated with quasi-final interpretants could be applied to an episode introduced in Freud's clinical study *The Rat Man*. After the departure of his lover, the patient stumbles on a stone, and he starts thinking that this stone could provoke an accident involving his beloved woman's car. So he picks up the stone, and he removes it from the road. After a few minutes, he realizes how irrational his action was. So he comes back to the spot and puts the stone back in the street⁴².

This example is a clear demonstration of the obsessive neurotic's impossibility to achieve a final interpretant. The sequence of contrasting decisions about the removal of the stone reproduces the emotive swing between love and hate, destructive thoughts and remorse. No outcome of the obsessive semiotic chain is ever final, insomuch as it is almost completely impotent against the extreme underlying emotional seesaw between love and hate. Mere rational understanding is then devoid of any power, since rationality is not at the core of the decisional process. These unconscious habits are not routines in the trivial sense of the term, nor can they be reduced to a dyadic stimulus-response schema. They share the logical complexity of logical interpretants, without sharing the rationality of the final interpretant. They are the outcome of logical quasi-final interpretants, or maybe of quasi-logical interpretants⁴³. Therefore, even unconscious habits share a characterizing trait with pragmatism's understanding of habits, specifically the «interplay between automatic habitual action and goal-related behavior»⁴⁴. Although such habits apparently function like automatisms, they are not devoid of thought-contents and goals. Simply, their thought-contents and goals are unconscious.

To sum up: 1) Peirce was indeed aware of the existence of unconscious (or at least partially unconscious) mental processes; 2) Following Peirce's terminology and classification of interpretants, Colapietro tackles the problem of unconscious habits, proposing some conceptual tools (again derived from Peirce) which could help our inquiry into the semiotic structure of these kinds of habits. But is Peirce alone in imagining the existence of unconscious habits, yielded by quasi-logical (or logical quasi-final) interpretants – i.e., interpretants that share the

⁴² S. Freud, *Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis*, in Id., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 10, London 1955, pp. 151-318.

⁴³ This latter option would help us in maintaining Peirce's emphasis on the aware and deliberate nature of habit changes produced by logical interpretants. Similar to logical interpretants, in quasi-logical interpretants sign and object are connected through a thought. But differently from logical interpretants, in this case the mediating thought is unconscious. However, a decision in this regard would require a detailed analysis of Peirce's thought which falls outside the scope of our discussion. I am grateful to Francesco Bellucci for our conversation on this topic.

⁴⁴ I. Testa, F. Caruana, *The Pragmatist Reappraisal of Habit in Contemporary Cognitive Science, Neuroscience, and Social Theory: Introductory Essay*, in I. Testa, F. Caruana (eds.), *Habits*, cit., p. 11.

triadic form of logical interpretants, without being consciously and reflectively mastered? Once again, Dewey seems to play a mediating and integrative role, between James' refusal of the unconscious and Peirce's acknowledgment of unconscious processes.

3.2. Dewey between the unconscious and the pre-conscious

In *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey discusses the theoretical contributions of psychoanalysis. The framework of this discussion is provided by the development of his early intuitions regarding the limited and contextual role of consciousness in action. Consciousness is not a constant presence in our psychological life. On the contrary, we become conscious of what is happening only when our habits are interrupted: even common sense tells us that the more efficient a habit is, the more unconsciously it operates.

Only a hitch in its workings occasions emotion and provokes thought. Now at these moments of a shifting in activity conscious feeling and thought arise and are accentuated. The disturbed adjustment of organism and environment is reflected in a temporary strife which concludes in a coming to terms of the old habit and the new impulse⁴⁵.

But alongside this classically pragmatist treatment of the interplay between pre-reflective habits, rupture, and the emergence of consciousness, we find also passages in which Dewey – in contrast to James – has no problem with using the word 'unconscious'. He even goes as far as to explicitly affirm that a psychology of habits like his own requires overcoming the primacy of consciousness:

A psychology based upon habits (and instincts which become elements in habits as soon as they are acted upon) will on the contrary fix its attention upon the objective conditions in which habits are formed and operate. The rise at the present time of a clinical psychology which revolts at traditional and orthodox psychology is a symptom of ethical import. It is a protest against the futility, as a tool of understanding and dealing with human nature in the concrete, of the psychology of conscious sensations, images and ideas. It exhibits a sense for reality in its insistence upon the profound importance of unconscious forces in determining not only overt conduct but desire, judgment, belief, idealization⁴⁶.

This passage seems to suggest that a pragmatist psychology of habits may find an ideal partner in the psychology of the unconscious – i.e., psychoanalysis. The two perspectives appear as natural allies in the struggle against the hegemony of the psychology of consciousness. However, Dewey's stance towards the psychology of the unconscious is not fully enthusiastic. On the one hand, what he appreciates in psychoanalysis is the acknowledgment of the dependence of mind upon socially constituted habits. The self is constituted by the

⁴⁵ *MW*14, p. 125.

⁴⁶ *MW*14, p. 61.

internalization of relation conflicts with others. On other hand, Dewey believes that psychoanalysis overcomes the paradigm of consciousness incompletely, as long as it remains trapped within a mentalistic framework. The «most popular forms of the clinical psychology» still think of mind as a «psychic realm or force». Therefore, the resulting conception of the unconscious boils down to the idea of an «unconscious consciousness»: «They get their truths mixed up in theory with the false psychology of original individual consciousness, just as the school of social psychologists does upon its side. Their elaborate artificial explanations, like the mystic collective mind, consciousness, over-soul, of social psychology, are due to failure to begin with the facts of habit and custom»⁴⁷.

This tight bond with the idea of the primacy of an individual psyche prevents psychoanalysis from acknowledging that the mind is foremost an impersonal process, which «it is not ours originally or by production». The development of the self must not be understood as a process of socialization of an originally pre-given individuality. Rather, it is a process of reappropriation of impersonal and collective forces and ideas. Freud's *Id* becomes a collective «it thinks»:

‘It thinks’ is a truer psychological statement than ‘I think’. Thoughts sprout and vegetate; ideas proliferate. They come from deep unconscious sources. ‘I think’ is a statement about voluntary action. Some suggestion surges from the unknown. Our active body of habits appropriates it. [...] The stuff of belief and proposition is not originated by us. It comes to us from others, by education, tradition and the suggestion of the environment. Our intelligence is bound up, so far as its materials are concerned, with the community life of which we are a part. We know what it communicates to us, and know according to the habits it forms in us. Science is an affair of civilization not of individual intellect⁴⁸.

Like Peirce, Dewey seems to acknowledge the importance of unconscious processes. Unlike Peirce, Dewey can explicitly mention the contributions of psychoanalysis, which in 1922 had already gained popularity both in Europe and in the USA⁴⁹. Unfortunately, Dewey's remarks on psychoanalysis – both positive and negative – are vague and scattered, and they do not take the shape of an accurate point by point reconstruction and criticism. Yet, they provide enough material to reconstruct his position about the pre-reflective nature of habits.

Consciousness is not a constitutive feature of habits. Rather, it appears when the habitual transactions between the organism and the social environment are disrupted. While Dewey mainly understands the pre-reflective functioning of habits in terms of preconscious processes – i.e., processes which are temporarily inaccessible to consciousness, but which can become conscious without major impediments – he also partially acknowledges the importance of unconscious processes in the strong sense

⁴⁷ *MW14*, p. 61.

⁴⁸ *MW14*, p. 216.

⁴⁹ E. Zaretsky, *Political Freud*, New York 2015.

of the term. At the same time, he refuses the mentalistic framework in which – in his opinion – psychoanalysis framed the concept of the unconscious.

More generally speaking, both Peirce and Dewey provide interesting insights into the complexity of the pre-reflective nature of habits. In the case of unconscious habits – or more precisely: of habits strongly influenced by unconscious drives and patterns – the road to intelligent reconstruction is sometimes blocked. In such cases, crises do not open a path to intelligence and to deliberate reconstruction of the relation with social environment. Rather, they seize the body and the mind in destructive patterns, and they make our thinking superficial and ineffective. While pragmatism has probably not paid sufficient attention to such pathological habits, at the same time it offers tools for thinking about how they function and how they can be reconstructed, in ways sometimes akin to – and sometimes incompatible with – those established by psychoanalysis⁵⁰.

3. A second factor of complication: the inertia of habits

A second complicating factor in the intelligent reconstruction of habits is what we will call the inertia of habits. Although they emerge from specific biological and social situations and conditions, habits seem to be provided with their own inertial force. And notwithstanding their plasticity, habits are not perfectly malleable. In his discussion of habits in chapter four of *Principles of Psychology*, James finds in this inertial force of habits a positive factor in social life:

Habit is thus the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance, and saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor. It alone prevents the hardest and most repulsive walks of life from being deserted by those brought up to tread therein. It keeps the fisherman and the deck-hand at sea through the winter; it holds the miner in his darkness, and nails the countryman to his log-cabin and his lonely farm through all the months of snow; it protects us from invasion by the natives of the desert and the frozen zone. It dooms us all to fight out the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or our early choice, and to make the best of a pursuit that disagrees, because there is no other for which we are fitted, and it is too late to begin again. It keeps different social strata from mixing. Already at the age of twenty-five you see the professional mannerism settling down on the young commercial traveller, on the young doctor, on the young minister, on the young counsellor-at-law. You see the little lines of cleavage running through the character, the tricks of thought, the prejudices, the ways of the 'shop,' in a word, from which the man can by and-by no more escape than his coat-sleeve can suddenly fall into a new set of folds. On the whole, it is best he

⁵⁰ On the relation between pragmatism and psychoanalysis in more general terms, see the already mentioned works by Colapietro and Santarelli, J. B. Lamarche, *Les témoins du désir. Freud, Dewey, Mead et la pertinence contestée de la sociologie de la psychanalyse*, «Réseaux», 202-203, 2017, pp. 311-340; G. Maddalena, *Jung and Peirce*, «European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy», IX, 1/2017; J. M. Côté, *George Herbert Mead's Concept of Society. A Critical Reconstruction*, New York 2016.

should not escape. It is well for the world that in most of us, by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again⁵¹.

According to James, it is good that people do not change their minds and their behavior that often. Habits are socially useful, because they prevent society from radical and destructive changes. The pragmatist principle of continuity here takes on a marked conservative flavor⁵².

Evidently, the radical progressive Dewey is unsatisfied by a merely positive consideration of the inertial and conservative force of habits. A clear example of his attitude in this regard is his approach towards the theoretical and political problem of crisis. This discussion intensified in the years following the great American crisis, namely the Great Depression triggered by the Wall Street crash of 1929. In both his strictly theoretical essays and his more militant interventions, Dewey sees the persistence of outdated habits as a factor in intensifying and worsening the crisis.

In his critique of the Democratic and Republican parties, both are accused of failing to tackle the crisis, in part due to close ties to the financial powers responsible for the 1929 crash. However, Dewey also accuses both parties of being trapped in a set of established habits of thoughts and action which he defines as 'property-minded'. Even when some of their representatives recognize the need to contrast the hegemony of some aggressive and powerful economic interests, the parties' habits push them to defend and preserve these interests: «In the clash between property interests and human interests, all their habits of thought and action fatally impel them to side with the former. They make concessions, but do not change the direction of their belief or behavior ... the parties are too committed and too habituated to purposes and policies diametrically at war with their intentions»⁵³ In doing so, they «perpetuate and cling to ideas and ideals of a past that has forever departed», becoming «so out of vital contact with the times, that the people are out of touch with them»⁵⁴.

This latter dimension becomes decisive in Dewey's discussion of liberalism in his 1935 *Liberalism and Social Action*. Here Dewey explains how, in an era marked by the uncontrolled power of the great financial and economic powers, the critiques of institutions as such – and consequently the critique of state intervention – take on a clearly conservative character in their defense of existing power relations. The habits of thought of the old liberalism, and particularly utilitarianism, have been preserved in a new era. But within this new context, they have betrayed their promise of emancipation, backing already dominating

⁵¹ W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 121.

⁵² This passage, while significant, does not exhaust the complexity of James' political and social orientation. See S. Marchetti, *Ethics and Philosophical Critique in William James*, New York 2015, especially pp. 214-247.

⁵³ LW6, p. 161.

⁵⁴ LW6, p. 160.

property interests against any attempt to democratically reorganize society and economics⁵⁵.

In more general terms, in his *Lectures in China*⁵⁶ Dewey considers in detail the entanglement between the persistence of habits and power relations. In his perspective, social groups address a specific social need – e.g., protection, education – and at the same time articulate it into a common interest⁵⁷. At an early stage, this group will attempt to realize and legitimize that interest. However, the habits through which that interest has been realized sometimes tend to take on an autonomous form: they persist even in a later phase in which that interest has been established. In some cases, these habits become solidified patterns of action, which lose contact with the living dimension of needs, desires and feelings from which they emerged, and which tend to dominate and hegemonize the patterns of other groups⁵⁸. In Dewey's theory of power, the tendency of certain habits to become rigid plays a far more important role than the conscious intentions of individuals. Many of the dominant interests in a given society are harmful precisely insofar as they persist in existing in their rigid form, losing touch with the vital needs from which they emerged while ignoring or dominating the other needs and interests within society⁵⁹.

So there is nothing automatic about the sequence 'habit-crisis-reflection-intelligent reconstruction'. Dewey seems to admit – at least implicitly – that habits may become obsolete without the individual and collective subjects in whom those habits are embodied becoming aware of the crisis. This represents a kind of incomplete⁶⁰ crisis, in which we remain unaware of problems which may be clearly evident to outside observers, and perhaps even to our own abstract considerations, were we to focus our attention on it. The two factors of non-reflexivity and inertia seem to cooperate in this case. We have an unreflective experience of such habits: It feels to us as if they were working well, because they survive even in conditions and social situations that are different from the initial ones, despite being unfavorable to our needs and interests and to those of others.

The mechanisms that protect us from feeling such a problematic situation are often – partially or totally – unconscious in nature: self-deception; protection of our ideal image of ourselves; self-defense from internal and external conflicts. The pragmatists focus on the plasticity of habits and on the role that intelligence

⁵⁵ LW12, p. 184.

⁵⁶ J. Dewey, *Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy*, «European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy», ed. by R. Frega, R. Gronda, VII-2, 2015.

⁵⁷ R. Frega, *John Dewey's Social Philosophy. A Restatement*, «European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy», VII-2, 2015.

⁵⁸ I. Testa, *Dominant Patterns in Associated Living: Hegemony, Domination, and Ideological Recognition in Dewey's Lectures in China*, «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 53, (1), 2017, pp. 29-52.

⁵⁹ For an interesting and positive re-evaluation of the inertial character of habits from a Dewey inspired standpoint, see B. Stiegler, «*Il faut d'adapter*». *Sur un nouvel impératif politique*, Paris 2019.

⁶⁰ I have taken the concept of completeness and incompleteness from G. Maddalena, *The Philosophy of Gesture*, Montreal 2015.

can play in reconfiguring our transactions should not, therefore, be identified with the optimistic (perhaps even naive) idea of an immediate, continuous and automatic mutual adaptation of organisms and reality.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to highlight some little-discussed aspects of the pragmatist concept of habit, leaning mainly on Dewey's writings. Specifically, I attempted to show how the pragmatists, despite emphasizing the plastic and relational character of habit, were nonetheless aware of the existence of habits that seems to resist individual or collective intelligent reconstructions. To this end, I have focused more in detail on the pre-reflective dimension of habits, and more briefly on their inertial nature. Both of these factors introduce elements of complexity into the 'pre-reflective habit-rupture-consciousness-intelligence-reconstruction' scheme that is often attributed to pragmatists. This is not to underestimate the importance and innovative character of this scheme, which represents one of the most radical attempts to challenge the epistemological primacy of consciousness without falling into irrationalism. Rather, the main purpose of the article is to show that important though fragmentary insights can be found in pragmatism that make this scheme more complex and articulate.

What is missing in the pragmatist contributions, however, is a more detailed analysis of the elements which constitute the dark side of habits. These aspects can be further developed through a dialogue with approaches that are in some ways akin to, and in others perhaps incompatible with pragmatism. One such approach is certainly Bourdieu's sociology. Despite the undeniable differences highlighted by secondary literature⁶¹, Bourdieu's theory offers the opportunity to articulate the aforementioned pragmatist insights in greater detail – see for instance the concepts of cleft *habitus*, of hysteresis, and of 'méconnaissance'⁶². The question – bound to remain open here – is whether such further contributions can be integrated into the pragmatist theory of habits, or whether they require a radical revision of it. A definitive answer to that question requires further analysis and interpretation beyond the scope of the present article.

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⁶¹ R. Dreon, *Human Landscapes*, cit.; L. Quéré, *Bourdieu et le pragmatisme américain sur la créativité de l'habitude*; N. Crossley, *Habit and Habitus*, «Body & Society», 19, 2-3, 2013, pp. 136-161.

⁶² See for instance P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge 1990; P. Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, Stanford 2000.