e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA
Vol. 6 — Num. 2 — December 2025

A Note on George Turnbull and the Law of Habits

Sofia Sandreschi de Robertis
Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Italy

George Turnbull, remembered today primarily for the influence he exerted on Thomas Reid, is a relatively obscure figure of the Scottish Enlightenment whose thought, however, is in many respects original and worthy of close consideration.[1] Born in 1698, he studied at the University of Edinburgh between 1711 and 1721, the year in which he became Regent at Marischal College, Aberdeen. There he met Reid, who would be his student from 1723 to 1726. Beginning the following year, Turnbull spent the next fifteen years travelling throughout Europe, working as a private tutor, mainly in France, Germany, and Italy.[2]

Turnbull was the first to advocate the usefulness of the Newtonian scientific method for the construction of philosophy, as is evident from the very title of his 1723 graduation thesis: *De scientiae naturalis cum philosophia morali conjunctione*. A deeply religious man – he was ordained into the Church of England in 1739 – his philosophical interests were closely intertwined with moral and theological questions. Indeed, his most important work, published

1 With the exception of the works of John P. Wright (1994; 2011) and John P. Wright and Kathryn Tabb (2023).

2 For more detailed biographical information, see Wood 2004.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

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Citation Sandreschi de Robertis, Sofia (2025). "George Turnbull and the Law of Habits". *JoLMA*, 6(2), 13-16.

DOI 10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2025/02/010

in two volumes in 1740, deals precisely with The Principles of Moral and Christian Philosophy.[3]

The text presented here is an excerpt from the first volume, entitled *The Principles of Moral Philosophy*. In addressing the problem of habit, Turnbull is the first to employ the expression Law of habits. Specifically, he writes: "a propension to do, and a facility and readiness in doing, acquired by repeated exercise called the *Law of habits*" (*infra* <99>). The fact that this is "called" the *Law of habits* might lead us to think that Turnbull is referring to something else – perhaps to a source from which he derived this particular expression. However, as far as current knowledge allows us to determine, he appears to be the first among his contemporaries – both in the English and French contexts – to make use of it. We might therefore hypothesize that he drew upon a more distant source, possibly of Greek or Latin origin, or perhaps – more simply – that the phrase constitutes a rhetorical device intended to lend greater authority to his argument, which aims to highlight the effects of the *Law of habits*. The first consequence, perhaps the most important, consists in the development of memory and habitual knowledge. Habit emerges immediately in all its power as a principle of the perfection of all our faculties: "Attention, judging, reasoning, writing, speaking, composing, in one word, all our powers and actions in their perfection are so many respective habits".

After emphasizing how habit – or the association of ideas – has the power to render agreeable what was previously disagreeable, Turnbull goes on to formulate what would only a century later come to be known as the "double law of habit".[4] He observes, in fact, that:

> As practical habits are formed and strengthned by repeated acts; so passive impressions are found to grow weaker by being repeated on us. Whence it must follow, that active habits may be gradually forming and strengthning by a course of acting upon such and such motives; while excitements themselves are proportionably by degrees becoming less sensible, that is, are continually less and less felt, as the active habits strengthen (*infra* <103>).

He thus establishes the inversely proportional power of habit to strengthen our ways of acting – the so-called "active habits" – through

3 On the problem of the relationship between the two volumes, see the introduction by Alexander Broadie to G. Turnbull (2005, xi-xii).

4 A few years earlier, Butler (1736) had already outlined the content of the double law, although without employing this expression. However, it would not be until the nineteenth century, with the contribution of Maine de Biran [1802] (1987) and later of Ravaisson [1838] (2008), that the double law would receive its explicit and complete formulation.

a weakening of impressions, which are instead passive. Precisely because they escape perception, active habits become part of our character and acquire the capacity to influence our actions with even greater force. Not only do certain habits become part of our temperament, but the temperament itself is formed as a direct consequence of the *Law of habits*, since, although character finds its root in nature, it is only through the repetition of certain acts that it assumes its complete and definitive form. In this regard, Turnbull, rather than emphasizing the rigidity of traits acquired through habit – as many authors before and after him do – prefers to highlight their transformative capacity. Indeed, it is precisely thanks to the *Law of Habits* that each of us can modify undesirable aspects of our temperament and become what we wish to be.

Broadly speaking, according to Turnbull, there are two kinds of temperament: the deliberative, which consists in "the habitual power of enquiring and judging before we choose or act", and its opposite, which coincides with "the habit of acting precipitately, and in blind, slavish obedience to every fancy or appetite that assails us" (*infra* <105>). Habit, therefore, is a neutral factor that we can choose to exercise either in the direction of a "*vile slavery and impotence*" or toward a "*command* over ourselves", which represents nothing other than the very possibility of our liberty.

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