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The Law of Habits
An Excerpt from *The Principles of Moral and Christian Philosophy*

George Turnbull

George Turnbull, *The Principles of Moral and Christian Philosophy*. Volume 1. *The Principles of Moral Philosophy*. ed. and with an Introduction by A. Broadie, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005, Part I, Chapter III, pp. 133-41. In the text, the pages of the original edition (G. Turnbull, *The Principles of Moral Philosophy*, London: John Noon, 1740) are indicated in square brackets. In the footnotes, the editor's additions are indicated in square brackets.

I now proceed to consider some effects, which though habits and association of ideas are really one and the same thing, and really resolve into one principle; yet are in common language called active habits. For by that name are all associations of ideas called, which terminate in what is termed action either of the mind or of the body. Now provided, on this head, we make mention of the most remarkable phenomena belonging to it, it is but of <99> little consequence in what order effects so nearly related to one another are proposed.

I. It is in consequence of a propension to do, and a facility and readiness in doing, acquired by repeated exercise called the *Law of habits,* that we have memory and habitual knowledge, learn languages with tolerable ease, attain to grace of body, as in dancing; to a good ear in music, a good eye in painting or architecture, and a good taste of any ingenious composition, as in oratory or poetry. For what else is memory, but the power of recalling with facility and quickness ideas and truths we had formerly discovered or perceived? and how is it strengthened or improved but by exercise? Without memory there can

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be no invention, judgment, nor wit, because without memory ideas cannot be readily and quickly laid together, in order to be compared, that their agreements and resemblances, or disagreements and differences, may be discerned. And what is taste, but the power of judging truly with quickness acquired by frequent consideration and practice: that is, confirmed into habit by repeated acts? In fine, it is in consequence of this law, or formation of our mind, that the reiterated exercises of any of our faculties are not lost labour, but produce perfection. Attention, judging, reasoning, writing, speaking, composing, in one word, all our powers and actions in their perfection are so many respective habits: and therefore, to ask why the mind is so framed, is to ask, why perfection of any kind is attainable by us, or within our power. Instruction and education presuppose this frame of mind in the rules laid down with regard to them: and the effect of education, or early accustomance is well expressed by the common proverb, which calls it, *A second nature.* To exemplify this observation, and at the same time to shew what true *logic* ought to be, and really was among the <100> ancients, I shall just mention two observations of *Cicero*,[1] with regard to the improvement of memory by due exercise. 1. The way, says he, to be able to retain ideas and judgments, so as to have the use of them always at our command, is to accustom ourselves to attend to things with great closeness and stedfastness; and to ask ourselves before we quit the consideration of any object, whether it is not worth while to store it up in the mind. And if it be, we ought (says he) as it were, formally to charge our memory with the custody of it, for certain particular reasons and uses, to be at the same time laid up in the mind with it. Did we take this method, we should have but little reason to complain of the slipperiness and treachery of memory. But we, it seems, expect it should be strong and perfect, without our taking pains to improve it: that is, we expect a habit to be formed, otherwise than by repeated exercise. 2. What would be of great help to memory, according to the same author, is, not letting any object of

1 *Cicero de inventione rhetorica. De oratore, &c.* There is a fine passage to the same purpose, in the *Dissertationes incerti cujusdam pythagorei dorico sermone conscriptae.* Published in a collection of *Greek* tracts, by Mr. *Gale. Dissertation* 5. An virtus & sapientia doceri possent. Sed optimum fuit, & in vitae commoda pulcherrimum inventum memoriae artificium, ad omnia utile. — Hoc autem in eo consistit, primo si animum admodum advertas. — Secundo si mediteris quaecunque audieris. — Tertio si rerum quas audis, imagines reponere noveris, &c. [There is a discussion of exercises for improving memory in Cicero, *De oratore,* II.350–67. Cicero, *De oratore, Books I and II,* trans. E.W. Sutton, completed by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1942). *Dissertationes incerti cuiusdam pythagorei dorico sermone conscriptae:* "Can virtue and wisdom be taught? But the best thing was the art of memory, a very fine device that contributed to the conveniences of life and was useful for everything. The art consists in this, first you concentrate hard, secondly you think about what you've heard, and thirdly you try to form images of what you have been hearing about." In Gale, ed., *Opuscula mythologica, physica et ethica. Graece et Latine…* (Amsterdam, 1688), 731.]

importance pass, till we have considered its analogies, relations, and oppositions, with respect to several other objects or truths already of our acquaintance. For by so doing, there necessarily would be, in consequence of the law of habits and association of ideas, various securities for our being able to recal it, in proportion to the variety of analogies, relations, agreements, differences and oppositions to other objects we had observed in it. Technical rules for assist-<101>ing and improving memory, are founded upon the same principle, *viz.* the law of habits. But there is this manifest difference between them, and those rules of *Cicero:* That while, in order to help memory, we are imployed in considering many real analogies and oppositions, we really are at the same time increasing our stock of useful knowledge, and improving our inventive faculty. For does not a great part of science consist in the knowledge of analogies and oppositions among objects? What else is knowledge? And wherein does the perfection of the inventive faculty consist, but in being able to assemble ideas together into proper order, with great facility and quickness, in order to discover hitherto unobserved relations of ideas, by seeing them in new positions?

II. It is in consequence of the law of habits, that imitation passes into custom, and that example has such powerful influence upon our temper and behaviour. Nature hath wisely made us imitative creatures, *apes,* if I may so speak. But our disposition to imitate would be of no use to us, did not repeated imitations produce habitual conformity to what we imitate. *Quintilian* gives an excellent advice with regard to imitation, when speaking of stage-actors he tells us, that among them it frequently happens, "*imitatio in mores transit.*"[2] He on this occasion sagely advises, for that reason to be extremely cautious, and to take good heed what we allow ourselves to imitate or copy after, in writing or style for instance, but above all in life and manners.

It is a very remarkable effect of the law of habits, that what is at first very uneasy and disagreeable, becomes by use, or association of ideas and habit, exceeding pleasant and agreeable. Hence it is that we come to like the train of business we have been for some time inured to, however disagreeable <102> it might have been at first. Upon this is founded the ancient sage advice to young people about the choice of a profession in life, "To chuse that which is likeliest to be most advantageous to them, provided they have abilities for it, even though they should have preconceived some prejudice against it, or aversion

2 [Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria,* I.xi.1: "Frequent imitation develops into habit." Quintilian, *The Orator's Education,* ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell, 5 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001).]

to it, because custom will make it agreeable."[3] It is owing in some measure to this law of habits, that people of the same business in life, or of the same rank and station, do so readily associate together. It is very fit it should be so on many accounts; but chiefly because people of the same profession will by conversation about their common art, which will naturally be the subject of their discourse, mutually learn from one another, and mutually excite emulation one in another. And so true is the fact, that it is become an universal proverb, *Birds of a feather flock together*.

We observed before, that a fondness after novelty is necessary in our nature,[4] to spur us to seek after new objects, and new knowledge; but that this desire of novelty is ballanced in our frame by the liking contracted to an object by habitual commerce with it, lest our itch after novelty should render us too unsteady, too desultory, and consequently too superficial and heedless in our attention to an object, to be able to attain to the full knowledge of it. Now it is in consequence of the law of habits, that this liking to an object is formed. By long or frequent conversation with an object, we become more pleased with it: the more narrowly and attentively we have considered it, the more we delight in it; for we find by frequently reasoning about the same object, that it is not new objects only that can afford us fresh entertainment; but that <103> every object is an endless fund of new discoveries: and we at the same time experience, that the more we employ ourselves about the same object, the more easy it becomes to us to make progress in new discoveries about it; and thus a fondness for the same object, or the same train of study, is contracted, so that we are not easily prevailed upon, even by quite new ones, to desert it: or if we are, yet we return to it again with such a relish, as one renews conversation with an old acquaintance he had not seen for some time.

III. But one of the most remarkable advantages of the law of habits is, *(I shall give it in the words of an excellent author),*[5] a power with regard to pleasure and pain in respect of practical habits. 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

3 *Plutarch de sanitate tuenda.* [The passage is in Plutarch's *De sanitate tuenda,* 123C; see also his *De tranquillitate animi,* 466F; and *De exilio,* 602B. Plutarch, *Omnia quae extant opera,* 2 vols. (Paris, 1624).]

4 In the first chapter, upon our furniture for progress in knowledge.

5 Dr. *Butler* (the Bishop of *Bristol*) upon analogy. [Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1736), I.V.ii.]

becoming less sensible, that is, are continually less and less felt, as the active habits strengthen. Experience confirms this.

For active principles at the very time they are less lively in perception than they were, are found to be somehow wrought into character and temper, and become more powerful in influencing our practice. Thus perception of danger is a natural excitement of passive fear, and active caution: and by being inured to danger, habits of the latter are gradually wrought, at the same time that the former gradually lessens. Perception of distress is a natural excitement, passively to pity, and actively to relieve it. But let a man set himself to attend to, enquire out and relieve distressed persons, and he <104> cannot but be less and less affected with the various miseries of human life, with which he must become acquainted: but yet, at the same time, benevolence considered, not as a passion, but as a practical principle of action will strengthen; and whilst he passionately compassionates the distressed less, he will acquire a greater aptitude actively to assist and befriend them. It is the same with all other affections which may be worked by exercise into active principles, and being settled and established as such in the mind, constitute a habitual character or temper that exerts itself calmly and regularly.

IV. It is indeed, in consequence of the law of habits that temper or character is formed, for tho all the affections of mankind be, and must be originally from nature; and art, or exercise, cannot create, but can only make some change to the better or worse upon what nature hath implanted in our breasts; yet habit is the nurse of all affections: it is by repeated acts that any one is wrought into temper or becomes habitual. Whatever temper we would form, we must do it not merely by enforcing upon our minds, a strong conviction of its usefulness and reasonableness; but chiefly by exerting ourselves to call forth into action the affections which constitute it; by exercising them frequently, or by various acts; and that without intermission till the point is gained; that is, till these affections are become strong, ready to go out into action on any proper occasion; and we have contracted a propension to exert them. This is the way temper or character is formed. And by this means, it is in our power to change any temper we may have contracted, and to form ourselves to any desireable one. And this leads me to observe, that the chief benefit of the law of habits, is our being able in consequence of it to acquire the *deliberative temper or habit:* that is, the habitual power of enquiring and judging before we choose or <105> act; the opposite to which is the habit of acting precipitately, and in blind, slavish obedience to every fancy or appetite that assails us. Whatever metaphysical janglings there have been about the freedom of our will; our moral dominion, liberty, and mastership of ourselves certainly consist in the established habit of thinking well before we act; insomuch as to be sure of ourselves, that no fancy or appetite shall be able to hurry us away into action, till reason

and moral conscience have pronounced an impartial sentence about them. It is this command over ourselves, this empire over our passions, which enables us to put trust or confidence in ourselves, and renders us sure and trust-worthy in society to others. In it do true wisdom and freedom lie. And as it ought to be the chief business of education to form early this deliberative habit and temper in young minds; and the constant employment of every man to preserve and maintain it in due strength; so the only way to attain to it, or uphold it, is, 1. By inculcating upon ourselves the excellence and usefulness of it, and the manifold disadvantages that redound from the want or weakness of it. And, 2. by practicing ourselves in choosing and acting after the deliberative judicious manner; in habituating ourselves to call all sorts of ideas, fancies, and motives to a strict account; or in accustoming whatever opinion or desire claims our pursuit, to give in its reasons at the bar of reason, and to wait patiently its examination and sentence. Thus alone is the right moral temper formed. And these two exercises will be the constant employment of every one, who aims at the improvement and perfection of his mind; or at acting like a rational creature, and with true inward liberty and self-dominion, which, like every other habit, can only be acquired by practice and custom. 'Tis no matter as to the present case, how the will is determined, by motives or by desires, by the last act of the judgment, or by the mind itself, that is, <106> by its own self-motive power. For whatever be the meaning of such phrases, 'tis as certain, that *command* over ourselves is *liberty,* as that being so *enthralled* by any appetite, as not to be able so much as to examine its pretensions before we yield to it; or being so *habituated* to desultoriness and thoughtlessness, and blind rash choice, as not to have it in our power to think or judge before we act, is *vile slavery and impotence.*

Thus therefore it is really in consequence of the law of habits, that we are capable of liberty, or are free agents.[6] Now, I think from what

6 So the ancients define liberty. Soli enim hi vivunt ut volunt, qui quid velle debeant didicerunt. Ineruditae autem & rationis expertes animi incitationes atque actiones exilem quandam ignobilemque voluntatis libertatem multa cum poenitentia conjunctam habent, &c. *Plutarch* de auditione libellus. So *Cicero,* paradox. 5. Quid est enim libertas? potestas vivendi ut velis. Quis igitur vivit, ut vult? nisi qui recta sequitur, qui officio gaudet, cui vivendi via considerata atque provisa est, &c. See a fine description of this moral freedom by *Persius, Satyr.* 5. Libertate opus est, &c. [Plutarch, *De auditione,* 37E: "For only those live as they wish who have learned what they ought to wish. But ignorant and irrational impulses and acts involve a rather meagre and ignoble freedom of will that is conjoined with a good deal of repenting." Cicero, *Paradoxa Stoicorum,* V.34: "For what is freedom? the power to live as you will. Who then lives as he wills except one who follows the things that are right, who delights in his duty, who has a well-considered path of life mapped out before him, etc." Cicero, *De oratore, Book III, De fato, Paradoxa Stoicorum, De partitione oratoria,* trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942). Persius, *Satires,* V.73: "What we want is true liberty, etc." *Juvenal and Persius,* trans. G.G. Ramsay, rev. ed., Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940).]

has been said of the association of ideas and of habits, we may justly conclude, "That the laws relating to them are of great use in our nature, either necessary, or fitly chosen. And consequently, that no effects which take their rise from them, are evils absolutely considered, or with regard to the whole frame and constitution of the human mind."

But there is a truth, which necessarily results from what hath been laid down, that may justly be added to this article, by way of *corolary;* and it is this, "That even in an absolutely perfect constitution of things, where the law of habit and association takes place, if knowledge be progressive, and gradually acquireable in proportion to application to improve in it, and consequently minds must be in an infant state at their entrance upon the world; some associations and habits must be early formed by minds in such a state <107> of things, which ought to be broken, and yet which cannot be broken or dissolved by reason without difficulty and struggling. For it is impossible, but some ideas, by being frequently presented to the mind conjointly must associate, which ought not to be associated; or the association of which is contrary to happiness and reason." But this observation, so plainly follows from what has been proved, that it is needless to dwell longer upon it. I shall therefore but just add, that if any one will pursue it in his own mind through all its consequences, he shall find a solution arising from it to many objections made against the present state of mankind; to those especially which are taken from the prevalence of vice in the world: for wrong opinions must produce wrong choice and action: and yet of most wrong choices, it may be said, *Decipimur specie recti*.[7]

7 [Horace, *Ars poetica,* 25. "We deceive ourselves by semblance of truth." Horace, *Satires, Epistles and Ars poetica,* trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann; New York: Putnam, 1926).]