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Triadic Law of Habit
Reflecting on David Hartley's Theory and Practice of Moral Development

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Abstract This paper reconstructs and frames David Hartley's triadic law of habit as foundational to his neurophilosophy of moral development. Extending the focus onto his implementation of the 'Rule of Life' – a natural principle of moral progress –, it argues that the super-empirical reality referred to in Hartley's mystical vocabulary is emotionally invested by his own practice. Through an examination of his methods – particularly meditation and language cultivation – the paper presents Hartley as a meaningful interlocutor on the issue of moral stagnation and reflects on his relevance to the contemporary challenge of social fragmentation.

Keywords David Hartley. Language. Practical philosophy. Mysticism. Habit.

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1 Introduction

Doing philosophy as a living can require that we focus on theory and practice in different ways. For example, one may say that an academic philosopher tends to work mostly with concepts, theories, positions and justifications, while a philosophical practitioner pays attention to the impact of philosophical beliefs and presuppositions on people's life, and vice-versa. Arguably, several human sciences including philosophy have started to focus on practices only since the 1980s (Schatzki 2001), and philosophical practice like counseling is still considered an emerging field of professional activity (Gruengard 2023). However, several historical thinkers, especially in the ancient tradition, already were practitioners in their day (Grosso 2005). Whenever possible, knowing both an author's theories and life allows us to understand the existential stakes of their philosophical blueprint in greater depth. In the present paper I will reconstruct David Hartley's triadic law of habit in his neurophilosophy of moral development, based on arguments derived from his main philosophical publication: *Observations on Man*; I will then argue that the religious vocabulary employed by Hartley, the empirical and super-empirical phenomenology that he refers to when advocating the practical benefits of moral virtue reflect his own religious practice as a philosopher. But why is David Hartley – eighteenth century philosopher and physician – relevant today in the first place?

In a recent essay entitled *Psychopolitics*, the philosopher and cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han writes about a 'neoliberal' work culture – driven by internalized self-exploitative habits of productivity – that contributes to mental exhaustion on a mass scale and a rise in chronic nervous disorders. To prevent fatigue and increase performance, he reckons, the daily use of neuroenhancement substances and assorted bio-hacking techniques has become mainstream (Han 2017). Extending the diagnosis in *The Palliative Society,* Han observes that the avoidance of pain and suffering has been elevated to what amounts to a quasi-constitutional right. These attitudes reduce life to a matter of lonely biological survival and utility, thereby stripping existence from most of its metaphysical appeal. More importantly, it is quietly displacing an older, collective therapeutic practice: the weaving of a shared narrative through which pain and suffering can be interpreted, dignified, and endured in common (Han 2021). While Han's bold characterization of a certain metamodern moral dissolution may resonate with a broader current public debate, it also echoes concerns voiced almost three centuries earlier.

Around 1734 David Hartley writes two treatises on *The Progress of Happiness deduced from Reason – & from Scriptures* that he later recasts and publishes in 1749 as one treatise entitled *Observations on Man; His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations* (Allen 1999, 290).

In this work David Hartley contends that human beings, despite their finely tuned physical composition, are most of the time laboring under a set of destructive illusions. Chief among these is the tendency for individuals to be grossly self-interested, to the point of their own misery. Relentless devotion to immediate pleasure makes people ill through bad habits. Engagement in business affairs, and involvement with civil and religious institutions – each perpetually vulnerable to corruption – can likewise generate affliction. At best, Hartley maintains, disease, injustice, and other calamities can be opportunities to focus on what truly matters and make wiser decisions. This diagnosis of the human predicament is immediately followed by a complementary moral prescription. Even though our 'Body Natural' remains subject to the laws of nature and the 'Body Politic' to the laws of humankind, Hartley insists that the mind possesses a spiritual dimension that alone conduces to genuine happiness; attuned to 'the Deity' through meditative practices and the cultivation of words, the mind forges and shares a form of communication (linguistic or non-) that binds a community together. After the end of time, he specifies, human beings, and possibly animals, too, will merge into one 'Mystical Body' (OM1.4.3.96, 462; OM2.3.6.68, 287).

Early critic of modernity, Hartley notices a tendency for his contemporaries to fall into self-centered delusions that deflect their attention from the spiritual significance of their life. Most of them can spend years ignoring that the ceaseless pursuit of 'gross Self-interest' cannot bring them the highest degree of happiness (OM1.4.3.96). They are generally unaware of the conditions for their moral development and the degree of their responsibility in this matter. Despite this alarmist observation, Hartley argues that human beings are naturally bound to develop moral sense. He calls this natural principle the 'Rule of Life'. His philosophical position raises two practical questions for us: How can we best follow the 'Rule of Life', when our mental bandwidth is almost entirely absorbed by everyday anxieties? If Hartley detected this issue in his day, did he provide any plan of action to cultivate moral development in the face of various forms of psycho-social determinism?

To address these questions, the first part of this paper offers a synthetic exposition of Hartley's theory of moral development, structured around a triadic law of habit that can be extracted from the first part of his *Observations*. In Hartley's account, human agency is largely shaped by education, past experiences, and entrenched habits. The second part – and central pivot – of the paper therefore turns to Hartley's theory of practice, focusing especially on meditation and the cultivation of language as effective transversal resources to reshape our habits and refine our moral sentiments. I conclude the paper with a consideration on the ritualistic dimension of Hartley's practice of moral development, and its relevance today. The aim is

to offer a reflection on this eighteenth-century philosopher, who may serve as a meaningful interlocutor in discussions on contemporary issues of moral progress and social fragmentation.

2 A Triadic Law of Habit

In the history of psychology, Hartley is presented as a pioneer of the associationist school, because he developed and substantiated Locke's doctrine of the association of ideas (Dacey 2022). Indeed, in the 1700 edition of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Locke affirms that the mind sometimes, pathologically, associates ideas that have nothing in common, only because experience joined them repeatedly over time, or because they appeared together in the mind by chance and were fastened by a strong passion; this phenomenon is especially common in children (Locke 1975 2.33; 1996 §137-8). Despite explicit reference to Locke, Hartley uses this theory to describe the totality of mental operations, including non-pathological ones. He supports associative psychology with a neurological account of brain vibrations, based on cutting-edge discoveries on electricity during the 1740s, which makes him also a pioneer in the history of neurosciences (Glassman, Buckingham 2007).

2.1 Vibrationism and the Fluctuations of Nervous Sensibility

When Hartley writes the *Observations on Man* one of his main scientific goals is to demonstrate that the best way to think about brain activity is in terms of nervous vibrations. After explaining that nerves are neither strings – Descartes's position –, nor tubes – Boerhaave's – he explains, inspired by Newton, that they consist of molecules moving in ether. Brain and nerves are made of a vibrating matter, which is active by default, and retains any mark that is frequently imprinted on it (OM 1.1.1.3, OM1.1.1.5). Nervous vibrations occurring in the brain are smaller than those in the rest of the body, which is why Hartley calls them 'vibratiuncles', 'miniature vibrations', or just 'miniatures'.

When a body receives sensory inputs, the vibratory motion of the nerves on which the sensation is imprinted undergoes a slight modification that is automatically carried towards the brain. The sensation can be pleasurable or painful at first. With repetition, the vibratory modification imprinted on the nerves by the sensory input can lose its ability to signal pleasure or pain. Repeated sensory inputs can turn the natural vibratory motion of the nerves into an altered, 'preternatural' state, where memorized preternatural vibratiuncles can become permanent.

> It is not unsuitable to the Doctrine of Vibrations, that the frequent Repetitions of the same external Impressions should have the Power of converting original Pains into Pleasures, and Pleasures into mere Sensations, *i.e.* into evanescent Pleasures; as we find it has in Fact. For this may be effected by such a Change in the Organ and Brain, as that the Organ shall send weaker and weaker Vibrations perpetually to the Brain, upon every successive Renewal of the same Impression, and the Brain become perpetually less and less disposed to receive strong Vibrations, though the Power of Communication from the Impression should continue the same. (OM1.1.1.6, 38)

Repeated vibrations, and the decrease of sensation they occasion, explain the transformation of sensory pleasures and pains into intellectual ones. The discrepancy between the fixation of a miniature vibration upon repeated sensory input, as in the case of memory, and the decrease of sensation initially associated to the sensory input supports Hartley's claim that ideas are not reducible to vibrations. Ideas and vibrations correspond, but they are not reducible to one another. "[H]owever impossible it may be to discover in what Way Vibrations cause, or are connected with, Sensations, or Ideas, *i.e.* tho' Vibrations be of a corporeal, Sensations and Ideas of a mental Nature" (OM1.1.1.5, 34). To the variety of ideas that a person has, corresponds a variety of miniature vibrations that differ in 'Degree, Kind, Place, and Line of Direction'.

Miniature vibrations, when they occur in a bundle, can form a tendency, in various areas of the brain, to vibrate in a certain way. Miniatures do not 'associate' like ideas do, by losing their identity in the mix. Rather, they collectively dispose the brain to adopt a specific state of vibratory motion, which has a qualitatively different impact on the nervous system than the original vibratory state, previous to the bundle of sensory inputs.

> Hence we may conceive, that a very complex Set of Vibrations, arising from the Mixture and Combinations of Degree, Kind, Place, and Line of Direction, exists always in the medullary Substance [*i.e.* brain matter], being kept up by its Heat, and the Pulsation of its Arteries, when other Causes are wanting, almost in the same manner as in a Concert of Music the Air is agitated by Vibrations of a very complex Kind. (OM1.1.2.9, 63-4)

The doctrine of vibrations describes the mechanical underpinnings of mental life in Hartley's philosophy. It emphasizes a physical order corresponding to thoughts and sensations, and prepares the ground for Hartley's account of language, contained in his doctrine of association. Vibrationism introduces a dimension of receptivity

and resistance, in the framework of which the material modifications that the mind produces in the body can be grasped. It especially characterizes the way a sensory input that repeats itself on the nervous system progressively erodes the sensation of pain or pleasure that it used to carry with it originally. While vibrationism has been rejected, in the history of science, as a valid candidate to describe nervous activity, Hartley's account may resonate with contemporary hypotheses in cognitive neurosciences, stipulating that the brain is characterized by patterns of oscillatory neuronal activity working at different frequency ranges (Viola, Zanin 2017).

2.2 Associationist Account of Reason and Action

For Hartley, association of ideas is a law describing and predicting the mental mechanisms that are necessary for learning processes, including imitative behavior, movement coordination, language acquisition, and mental operations in general. In this section I focus on the role of association in language – a central piece in Hartley's practice of moral development, which I also discuss in the second part of this paper.

"*Ideas of Sensation* may be termed *simple*, *intellectual* ones *complex*" (OM1, II). When two simple sensory ideas repeatedly occur together, their respective brain vibrations can combine (complex ideas), and when they occur in a succession, they can trigger one another (associated ideas) (OM1.2.10). Complex ideas can be further associated to form 'decomplex ideas' (OM1.1.2.12 cor.4-5). If a complex idea is composed of many simple ideas, it may appear that it does not resemble its constituting elements. (OM1.1.2.12 cor. 1). Unlike Locke, for whom associations of ideas are almost impossible to undo, Hartley contends that dreams can disassociate ideas that do not belong together.

> The Wilderness of our Dreams seems to be of singular Use to us, by interrupting and breaking the Course of our Associations. For, if we were always awake, some accidental Associations would be so much cemented by Continuance, as that nothing could afterwards disjoin them; which would be Madness. (OM1.3.5.91 cor. 2, 389)

Idea complexification resulting from association produces the basis on which language can be established. Hartley approaches language and knowledge together from the angle of the doctrine of association (OM1.3.1.85). He observes that a child learns to speak words by associating sounds that correspond to ideas. This simple thing corresponds to a complex process in the vibratory motion of the brain, where the vibration of a sensory idea, for instance, coalesces

with the vibrations of a series of sounds heard (syllables), and with that of the muscles used to repeat the word. The word thus formed in the child's brain becomes the interface between his inner life and the world outside (OM1.3.1.80; see also Allen 2024).

All the ideas that we receive from experience do not necessarily have words associated to them, and this may include sensory and intellectual ideas. For example, complex ideas deriving from our experience of musical or chromatic (dis)harmonies do not always have names (OM1.3.1.85, scholium). Unless we invent new words that capture the gist of these complex intellectual or sensory ideas, old ones may be used figuratively, being translated from one register of experience to another, to describe a new experience by analogy with an old one (OM1.3.1.82). Relatedly, not all words refer to sensations or thoughts that we have experienced ourselves, either personally or vicariously. This is why many words impact the mind differently, from one person to the next. Yet, words that refer to phenomena that we have never experienced first-hand can cause, by association with words referring to things that we did experience first-hand, new vibratory motion in the brain, generate sensations in the body, and thus orient actions and behavior (OM1.3.1.79). The existence of language and other forms of expression (e.g. artistic), which are indispensable for mental life, are explained by Hartley in terms of associations of ideas.

2.3 Affective Transfer

Association of ideas and the affective transfer it generates plays a crucial role in the advent of moral sense. It allows individuals to develop concern for metaphysical entities – such as moral or religious ideas – that lie beyond their immediate field of sensory experience. This evolution hinges on the capacity for pleasure and pain attending simple sensations to grow weaker, with repetition, and on the affective charge to be redirected towards abstract intellectual objects. This dynamic is essential for moral formation and takes place involuntarily most of the time. However, it can be instrumentalized through specific habit-forming practices, as we will see in the second part of this paper. How does affective transfer happen?

Hartley's doctrine of transfer, hidden within his doctrines of vibration and association, mainly describes the phenomenon by which sensory qualities can disappear and give rise to intellectual pleasures and pains by means of an affective investment in transcendent, metaphysical entities. Unlike movement and aggregation, respectively distinctive of vibration and association, transfer is the metamorphic principle allowing change. It is thus crucial in moral development. Transfer is involved in four types of phenomena. First, it allows for

the re-dimensioning or conversion of sensory inputs into ideas, and the related fluctuation in pleasure or pain. Second, it is responsible for the partial redirection of pain or pleasure attending a sensation towards the word designating that very sensation, once we learn that word. In the same way, it partly redirects the pleasure or pain towards its inferred cause. Third, transfer is instrumental to the mutation of a reactive attitude into a preemptive behavior, where passion metamorphoses into habit. Fourth, and related to all previous items, transfer invests a person's emotions into metaphysical entities, that would otherwise exist only as pure associations of ideas, devoid of any moral, epistemic, or practical authority.

Supporting the claim that sensory pleasure and pain experienced first-hand, often in childhood, are gradually transferred onto intellectual ideas by association, over our lifespan, Hartley holds that our strongest intellectual (complex) pains are invested by sensory (simple) pains coming from early experiences of touch – 'feeling' –, because early on in life, the sense of touch provided us with the greatest number of unpleasant sensations (OM1.2.1.33). Similarly, Hartley reckons, our strongest intellectual pleasures contain mostly miniatures of simple sensory pleasures of taste, because the sense of taste encompasses the widest variety of pleasures (OM1.2.2.44).

It is not absurd to assume that Hartley, who claims to be inspired by John Gay's 1732 *Preliminary Dissertation, Concerning the Fundamental Principle of Virtue and Morality* when it comes to explaining moral affections in associationist terms, also was inspired by the concept of transfer which Gay employs in the same *Dissertation*. In Gay's view, transfer follows naturally from association:

> [W]e find this power of Association so great as not only to transport our Passions and Affections beyond their proper bounds, both as to Intenseness and Duration [...] but also, that it is able to transfer them to improper Objects, and such as are of a quite different Nature from those to which our Reason had at first directed them. (Gay 1732, LV)

Hartley does not differentiate explicitly between association and transfer either; it seems to him, as it does to Gay, that the latter is a necessary consequence of the former and has no separate authority. At the same time, they agree that transfer characterizes the affective dimension of association. Is is the principle by which a feeling of pleasure or pain partly leaves an idea of sensation and transmits affective capacity to a more complex idea, ultimately supplying intellectual ideas with the power to stir sensations. The distinction between association and transfer amounts to that between conceptualizing many ideas and developing feelings towards some of them – like being able to imagine different kinds of sofas to furnish a

living room but then choosing only one of them to buy. Transfer thus emerges as a doctrine of its own right as it introduces something qualitatively different from mere association. At the same time, there would be no transfer without associated ideas to invest emotionally.

Drawing on arguments from his interpretation of Newtonian physics, Hales's chemistry, and Lockean associative psychology, Hartley contends that our direct experience of the world fosters moral development through a succession of natural stages of sublimation, in which sensual pleasures are gradually transformed into intellectual ones. Echoing Joseph Butler's 'double law of habit' *avant la lettre* – whereby repetition diminishes feeling while enhancing the capacity for action – I argue that Hartley adds 'transfer' as a third principle. What is identified today as a double law of habit – (1) the diminution of sensation and (2) the increase in the capacity to act – is thereby expanded, in Hartley's works, into a triadic law: (1) sensation decreases (OM1.1.1.6,38-39; OM1.1.2.9,58-64), (2) the capacity to act increases (OM1.1.2.14 cor. 5, 82), and (3) intention is redirected (OM1.1.2.14 cor. 8, 82; OM1.2.1.33, 143; OM1.2.2.44, 166; OM1.3.1.80, 283; OM1.4.5.98, 487; OM2.3.53, 228, among other passages). This triadic law integrates Hartley's doctrines of vibration, association, and transfer, constituting the theoretical foundation for the dynamic model of inner development, called the 'Rule of Life', which he derives from common sense and biblical teachings.

This triadic law raises the question of whether Hartley's system presents distinct levels of explanation or a genuine theoretical unity. Are the doctrines of vibration, association, and transfer merely parallel mechanisms, or are they organically interconnected? I argue that they are systematically interdependent in Hartley's account of moral development. Vibrationism addresses the physiological level by describing the workings of the brain, while associationism accounts for the workings of the mind. Transfer introduces a developmental dimension: it captures an inner dynamic of body and mind through which new entities – intellectual pleasures or pains – come into being and can be both conceptualized and *felt*. In this way, transfer not only complements but also supports the doctrines of vibration and association, pointing towards a unified theory of moral development.

3 Practice of Moral Development

With a materialist ontology of cerebral activity and a principle of association that operates automatically, Hartley's account emphasizes the mind's mechanistic dimension and its place within a broader context of natural creatures. The power of association is such that it enables people to live on 'auto-pilot' mode, so to speak, most of the time.

> Persons who read inattentively, *i.e.* see and speak almost without remembring, also those who labour under such a morbid Loss of Memory, as that though they see, hear, speak, and act, *pro re nata*, from Moment to Moment, yet they forget all immediately, somewhat resemble the Persons who walk and talk in Sleep. (OM1.3.5.91, 387)

This depiction, embedded in Hartley's account of dreams, may recall a certain dissociated way of living today. No specific problem can be identified if the unconscious habits characterizing the 'auto-pilot' way of living are perfect. They are typically not, however, and if we omit to interrupt our daily activities to reflect on the habits that no longer serve us, and try to correct them, then we are making ourselves more miserable than necessary.

Association and transfer, when left unattended, can escalate. In his associative account of sympathetic pleasures and pains, Hartley examines the case of anger. When a child is repeatedly victim of violence, they will associate the sensory pain with 'signs and tokens' from the environment (e.g. a person, a wallpaper, a smell, etc.), thus transferring miniature pains onto them. This chain of affective association – 'long Train of associated Remainders' – will protract their negative emotion in time, giving rise to the 'Passion of Anger' (OM1.4.5.97, 479). Association and transfer will also lead the child to designate the cause of their pain, and adapt their defensive behavior, eventually developing a preemptive attitude in the anticipation of future violence (OM1.4.5.97, 479).

> [T]hese Two Things have great Influence on each other. Our threatening Harm merely from a Motive of Security, leads us to wish it really; and wishing it leads us to threaten and inflict it, where it can afford no Security or Advantage to us. (OM1.4.5.97, 480)

The interplay between passive receptivity and active resistance has a gradual influence on a person's character. In the present example the passion of anger mutates naturally into a habit of cruelty.

> Cruelty and Malice are considered, not as Passions of the Mind, but as Habits, as the deliberate wishing of Misery to others [...] they are the genuine and necessary Offspring of Anger indulged and gratified (OM1.4.5.97, 481).

Despite the degree of determination external to the will that human beings must contend with in everyday life due to their mechanical frame, Hartley maintains that improvement can – and must – be made, primarily through reasoning and practice. First, when the

chain of causes is sufficiently examined, the victim of violence will often conclude that the person responsible for their suffering is also acting 'under the influence of other Causes'. While blame towards the tormentor is appropriate, cruelty is not (OM1.4.5.97, 480). Second, considering that revenge is a natural consequence of anger, and that anger gratified by revenge fosters a habit of cruelty, one must cultivate habits of benevolence to interrupt this vicious spiral. To that end, Hartley recommends various forms of active practice aimed at becoming virtous by changing our associations of ideas and the affections they carry.

The triadic law of habit, as derived from the description of mental life in the first section of this paper, serves as the theoretical backbone of Hartley's account of moral progress. It supports what he calls the 'Rule of Life' – a dynamic, self-improving product of human reason that possesses the moral authority to (re)direct the natural course of affections.

> Some Degree of Spirituality is the necessary Consequence of passing through Life. The sensible Pleasures and Pains must be transferred by Association more and more every Day, upon things that afford neither sensible Pleasure nor sensible Pain in themselves, and so beget the intellectual Pleasures and Pains. (OM1.1.2.14 Cor. 8, 82)

Hartley's synoptic overview of moral development starts with bodily sensation, on which mutually dependent layers are added in this order: imagination, ambition, rational self-interest, sympathy, theopathy (feelings towards God) and, finally, moral sense (OM1.3.3.89, 368-9). Necessary spiritual progress, however, meets with obstacles of all kinds. To help nature, Hartley provides and justifies, in the second part of his *Observations on Man*, practical rules concerning a variety of topics, including diet, social intercourse, arts, science, and religion (OM2.3.2-3, 6-7). He derives these rules from scientific observations, common sense, and biblical teachings. At the same time, this series of developmental stages and their effect on behavior remains explainable only by his triadic law of habit. Hartley thus insists on pluralist approach to understanding the world: the subjective account of personal experience, the knowledge derived scientific observations and conversations, the testimony of historians, and the Holy Scripture.

Intentional development of moral sensibility – the highest degree of moral progress – thus requires working on both habits and associations of ideas. Can we change a habit just by altering our associations of ideas? Hartley does not have an elaborate theoretical framework to address this question. However, if we examine his sources, a distinction between habit and associations

of ideas does emerge. The 'double law of habit' introduced by Bishop Joseph Butler (whom Hartley mentions in the second part of his *Observations* – OM2.2.28,145) stipulates that repetition decreases feeling or sensation while increasing a propensity to act towards a goal (Butler 1897 ch. 5 §8 92-93). Alongside this, the law of association presented by Locke (whom Hartley mentions in OM1.1, 5; OM1.1.2.10, 65) holds that repeated or intense conjunction of two mental states binds them together, so that when one is suggested, the other follows automatically (Locke 1975, 2.33, 394-401). The law of association thus accounts for the acquired readiness or ease in transitioning from one bit of mental content to another, including will and action. It bypasses the issues of fluctuating sensations and goal-directed behaviour.

Hartley does not emphasize any distinction between association and habit; in the opening of the *Observations*, he even uses both words synonymously (OM1, 5-6). Nevertheless, there are reasons to argue that the two concepts are not reducible to each other, and this distinction becomes significant in the context of intentional moral development. In Hartley's system, the association of ideas is a theory primarily aimed at explaining psychological – and, to some extent, physiological – phenomena while focusing on relatively small bits of content (OM1.1.2). Habit, on the other hand, though not explicitly thematized by Hartley, refers to a broader array of established patterns in an individual's behaviour and character, including their customary way of reasoning and speaking. Relatedly, Hartley notes that associations of ideas can arise by chance and be dissolved immediately – for example, during dreams – whereas habit settles through repeated action and becomes integrated into a person's character over time. Habit, therefore, may require more vibratory motion to change than association. In other words, one may see habit as a 'mental trait', and association of ideas as a 'mental state'. At the same time, association and transfer play a determining role in the formation of habit, and their refinement is the focus of Hartley's practices of prayer and meditation.

Exiting the unattended 'auto-pilot' mode of living – and its potential escalations – sometimes requires a misfortune, after which we begin paying attention to aspects of our life that need improvement for us to feel better. For awareness to lead to action and change, habits that once went unnoticed must give way to intentional, thoughtful practice. There are many reasons why practice may be understood as a species of habit (Carlisle 2017). One important difference, in the present context, between habit and practice is that habit – understood as a settled form of association – can be explained purely in mechanical terms, as a material residue of previous practice. Practice, however, is primarily intentional; it carries affection, and the feelings infused in it intensify with repetition.

The *Prayers and Religious Meditations* privately written by Hartley – between 1733 and 1742, and posthumously published in 1810 – attest that his theory of practice is grounded in a lifestyle of practice. The practices which he advocates in the *Observations* leverage the power of association and transfer, through the vibratory motion of the brain, to generate intellectual states of pleasure or pain that can prompt virtuous action. Alongside the practice of benevolence and charity – which is the main business of the 'Rule of Life' – Hartley claims that we also have a duty to engage in various species of prayers (alone, in family, in church) and to meditate on a fixed schedule (contemplation of nature, examination of our inner sentiments, etc.). The discipline and regularity serve the purpose of repetition, without which new habits cannot form. But the goal of prayer is to cultivate language and nurture 'theopathetic affections' – that is, a genuine conversation and relationship with the divine.

> The Matter of our Prayers must be different according to the State that we are in; for in Prayer we ought always to lay our real Case, whatever it be, before God. (OM2.3.73, 334)

Sometimes "there are internal Sentiments and Combinations of these, to which no Words can correspond"; in this case Hartley recommends 'mental Prayer' or the "Tendency and Aspiration of the Heart to God, without Words" (OM2.3.73, 333). When performed with intention, these prayers allow the mind and body to emotionally invest the idea of a Deity, and theopathetic affections in their turn distract the mind from pursuing misleading forms of happiness that may increase a person's normal share of misery. Hartley thus treats meditation and language as active practices, a *locus* of potential intervention where we can redirect the seemingly inexorable course of our lives. Active and repeated practice becomes indispensable to moral development and cannot be reduced to its theoretical aspects.

Connecting to our peers, to nature and to the divine, with or without words, requires practice. Through the cultivation of words and 'aspirations of the heart', unfolding across multiple registers, from scientific observation to religious teachings, and silent, contemplative modes of prayer, Hartley argues that individuals can start to perceive (metaphysical) objects through an inner sense, and develop feelings towards them. Practices such as attentive conversation, the reading of Holy Scripture, public and private prayer, and wordless communion through meditation are all means of de-centering the self, deepening the connection with each other, and developing moral sense. As individuals enter shared and private practices of communication, they open themselves to mutual

understanding, to the point of merging into one extensive body with its own sensibility, as this quote puts it:

> [I]f we suppose a Number of Persons thus making a Progress in pure unmixed Happiness, and capable of expressing their own Feelings, and of understanding those of others, by means of a perfect and adequate Language, they might be like new Senses and Powers of Perception to each other, and both give to and receive from each other Happiness indefinitely. (OM1.3.1.85, 320)

Hartley develops this image in the second part of the *Observations*, where he explains how imperfect benevolence, as long as it exceeds malevolence in a person's character, can benefit this person's small circle of 'Neighbours'. He adds that if this cercle were to extend and include 'every Man as his Friend', and if benevolence would be reciprocated in the same degree of perfection, then all the people involved

> would become, as it were, new Sets of Senses, and perceptive Powers, to each other [...] they would all become *Members of the mystical Body of Christ* [and] Happiness would circulate through this mystical Body without End, so as that each Particle of it would, in due time, arrive at each individual Point, or sentient Being, of the great Whole, that each would *inherit all Things.* (OM2.3.6.68, 287)

Language, whether linguistically articulated or silently embodied, thus becomes a medium not only for communication but for an internalized form of sublimation, where the mind can experience extra-ordinary feelings while remaining incorporated in physical reality. This happiness immanent to life on Earth is, for Hartley, the only genuine happiness human beings can expect, and should thus be their primary pursuit.

4 Conclusion

It has become commonplace in Hartley scholarship to claim that his system is difficult to label. In the context of his account of moral life, we can say that Hartley offers an image of human nature that can be understood as an interplay of mechanism and spirituality. This bidirectional relationship is not merely theoretical; it is shaped by practice and regulated by language. From our examination of his account of moral development, in both its theoretical and practical dimensions, two effects of practice can be highlighted: cognitive content and super-empirical reality.

(1) The word referring to a metaphysical entity – for instance, the word 'Deity' – can be misunderstood or misinterpreted in the absence of the practice through which affection is intentionally transferred onto that metaphysical entity. Thus, 'the Deity' may evoke different feelings, and conjure different images or associated words, between a Muslim, an atheist, or a Buddhist, because their practices and rituals differ (Carlisle 2017). Hartley emphasizes the importance of literacy and understanding of common sacred texts, as well as the embodiment of religious practices as the foundation of substantive collective meaning. Within a group, associations of ideas can multiply through sympathy, intensifying the feelings transferred onto an idea of the Deity. This shared idea is a cognitive effect of practice.

(2) Repeated intentional practices – such as private and public prayer, the reading of sacred texts, studying nature, and engaging in meditation at set times – has the power, through association and transfer, to generate intellectual pleasures related to moral ideas. Similarly, genuine conversations and the regular cultivation of language can enrich our experience as social beings, as Hartley illustrates with the figure of a mystical body including the dead, the living, and the unborn, the human and the non-human. These intentional practices thus allow for the development of new senses and access to a super-empirical reality, beyond the biological and social dimensions traditionally associated to a secular concept of humanity.

Studies in neurotheology assessing the impact of intentional prayer or spiritual practice on the brain suggest that we are wired for spirituality, regardless of any specific doctrinal content (Kyriacou 2018). Reflecting on Hartley's account of moral progress may seem limiting if we focus too narrowly on the specifics of the Christian doctrine and ethics presented in the second part of his *Observations on Man*. For this reason, I have attempted in this paper to emphasize not only the key points of Hartley's theory and practice, but also those that are most generalizable. Against the backdrop of social fragmentation in the modern West, the ritualistic discipline advocated by Hartley resonates – coming full circle – with Han's essay on rituals, where collective feelings and togetherness are set in contrast to senseless cult of the self (Han 2020). It portrays a life path characterized by spiritual progress through self-indifference, rather than the obsessive, often self-exploitative drift seen in the culture of personal development (Leslie 1972).

Abbreviation

OM = Hartley 1749

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