

Habits – semioses – habits

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Review of *Consensus on Peirce's Concept of Habit: Before and Beyond Consciousness*. (Studies in Applied Philosophy, Epistemology and Rational Ethics 31.) Donna E. West and Myrdene Anderson (eds.). Cham: Springer, 2016, 434 pp.

The most plastic of all things is the human mind, and next after that comes the organic world, the world of protoplasm. Now the generalizing tendency is the great law of mind, the law of association, the law of habit taking. We also find in all active protoplasm a tendency to take habits. Hence I was led to the hypothesis that the laws of the universe have been formed under a universal tendency of all things toward generalization and habit-taking. (1898, CP 7.515)²

It may fairly be urged that since the phenomena of habit may thus result from a purely mechanical arrangement, it is unnecessary to suppose that habit-taking is a primordial principle of the universe. (1892, CP 6.262)³

[...] and since knowledge is habit [...]. (1906, CP 4.531)⁴

This brief essay is a reflection on and appreciation of the thorough work collected and edited by Donna E. West and Myrdene Anderson entitled *Consensus on Peirce's Concept of Habit: Before and Beyond Consciousness* (2016) on the phenomenon and concept of habit through the interpretation of the legacy of Charles S. Peirce.

Semiotics is not yet completed. Semiotics – whose role is to serve with fundamental theories and methods of all sciences that study knowing and meaning-making in all their forms (including the primitive forms of semiosis ever since life emerged) – has a long history; however, as an institutionalized field it is only a half a century old. Habits of this science are not yet taught in many schools, and they are not ready either.

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² See also Santaella 2016 and Sonesson 2016 in the volume of West and Anderson, as well as Kull 2014, who all comment on this passage.

³ See also comments in Houser 2010: lxxxix.

⁴ See comments in Kilpinen 2015: 167–168.

Semiotics experiences its youthfulness. Accordingly, our part is pleasure and pain, ours an era of fascinating insights and discoveries in semiotics – as well as changes in views, or hard work and tiresome discussions. No concept is protected against re-interpretation.

Habit is a fundamental concept for semiotics; at least the development of semiotics demonstrates it is becoming one. It already was one in the thought of Peirce,⁵ and for that reason an inquiry into his work is a significant part of semiotics.

The development of the concept of habit has much to teach to us.⁶ For instance, it was important in the discussions of evolution and development in Peirce's times. Speaking of the Law of Habit, Joseph John Murphy, in *Habit and Intelligence*, says that "all vital actions whatever tend to repeat themselves, and consequently to become habitual"; he also speaks about three main types of habits: formative, motor, and mental habits, mentioning that "the law of mental habit is usually called the law of association of ideas" (Murphy 1869: 48). As Conwy Lloyd Morgan states in *Habit and Instinct*, "habit [...] involves individual acquisition" (Morgan 1896: 17). Or, as Samuel Butler observes in *Life and Habit*, "unconscious knowledge and unconscious volition are never acquired otherwise than as a result of experience, familiarity, or habit" (Butler 1878: 18). James Mark Baldwin (1906: 452) adds, concerning an organism's development, "[F]irst, it develops by getting *habits* formed; and second, it develops by getting new adaptations which involve the breaking up or modification of habits – these latter being called *accommodations*". In Peirce's system, habit takes a most fundamental place. All these scholars were important as regards the formation of the understanding of evolution on the basis of 'organic selection', or 'the Baldwinian mechanism', that today is known as a part of the Post-Darwinian, or epigenetic account of organic evolution.⁷

And this is not all. When the social aspect of habit is brought into a focus, a line of development of this concept appears which leads from Peirce's habit via Erwin Panofsky to Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus* (see Viola 2012).⁸ Yet another dimension of habit is related to moral decisions and ethics (see, e.g., Colapietro 2011).

How is diversification possible in the world? This was one of the central problems Peirce attempted to solve. However, it appears to have been a little too early for a scientifically well-argued answer to be formulated. Anyhow, modelling of habit is a

⁵ Cf. Pietarinen (2015: 378): "It turns out that at least experience and habit, two cornerstones of Peirce's thought, do not fall under the umbrella of signs. Every sign has its representative quality, its meaning. Meaning, in turn, is a habit, and it is derived from experience."

⁶ E.g. the use of the concept of habit already by David Hume, or in later psychology (Roekelein 1998: 224–225).

⁷ Also called Extended Synthesis, or semiotic theory of evolution; on this, see Kull 2016.

⁸ In this respect, see also Nöth 2016 and Sonesson 2016 in the volume of West and Anderson.

constituent of the problem of diversification. Theoretical semiotics has a long way to go, and this is kept in mind in the formulations that follow.

The semiotic concept of habit

Habits are regularities that are products of semiosis. Any habit is a regularity produced by semiosis. The process involved in habit-change is learning. Learning modifies habits and establishes new ones. Habits presuppose learning. Thus habits carry on one's experience.

Semiotics is a fundamental field of (study of) knowing – and habits are necessary for any knowing. Even more – as Peirce said, “knowledge is habit” (CP 4.531).

Jaakko Hintikka (2007: 17) added, “Surely the first order of business of any genuine theory of knowledge – the most important task both theoretically and practically – is how new [knowledge can be] acquired, not merely how previously obtained information can be evaluated”.

As Erkki Kilpinen (2015: 160) has said, habits are “vehicles of cognition”. With a reference to John Dewey, Kilpinen (2015: 160) also states that “intentionality without habituality is empty, habituality without intentionality is blind”⁹

What exactly is the relationship between semiosis and habit? Or rather, in the plural – semioses and habits (since sign is never single). Do habits include semioses or does semiosis always precede habit?

The formula ‘*habits – semioses – habits*’ can be used as a simple representation of the dynamic relationship. Semiosis occurs due to certain incompatibility in the interaction of habits, thus it requires habits. As a result of semioses, habits will change, or new habits appear.

It is reasonable to hypothesize that semiosis takes place only in a phenomenal present (in specious present, as William James used the term).¹⁰ Or rather semiosis creates the phenomenal present, the now. (We can even say that semiosis *is* the phenomenal now.) This is because interpretation assumes a possibility for choice (between options), while choice truly cannot happen in a sequentionality, it presumes presence and the present. In this aspect, semiosis is a choice between habits. Habits themselves are sequential behaviours.

Habits are inferences carried out by life far before logic becomes conscious or formal. Not only is habit repeated (almost automatic) behaviour; habit may also be repeated semiosis.

⁹ Cf. Dewey (1922: 67): “Thought which does not exist within ordinary habits of action lacks means of execution”. Cf. also comments in Glăveanu 2014 about ‘habitual creativity’.

¹⁰ More on this in Kull 2015.

The regularity of habits is based on scaffoldings (Hoffmeyer 2014). The scaffoldings, however, are modified by habits themselves.

Habit is always a construing. Thus, it is a basis for creativity (Glăveanu 2014). Almost paradoxically, the force of habit works as *vis vitalis*.

Consensus on Peirce's concept of habit?

Donna West and Myrdene Anderson have compiled and edited a book that can be described as a collective monograph on, and also a companion to, the Peircean approach to the phenomenon of habit. As far as I know, this book constitutes the first treatment of Peirce's unique concept of habit.

The editors of this volume are professional semioticians whose impact on contemporary semiotics has been remarkable (e.g., Anderson *et al.* 1984; 2003; Adams, Anderson 1994; Anderson, Merrell 1991; Anderson 2004, 2016a; West 2014). They have done marvellous work in carefully uniting the efforts of 27 semioticians from 12 countries: USA (7), Italy (3), Brazil (3), Finland (3), Germany (2), UK (2), Estonia (2), Sweden (1), Denmark (1), Norway (1), Mexico (1), Uruguay (1).

The book includes 23 chapters: the Preamble by Anderson, the Epilogue by West, and 6+7+8 articles, divided into three parts. An appendix includes a brief glossary of some of Peirce's terms. The list of authors is impressive. Part I (Background: Eco-logical Systems) includes the contributions of Dinda L. Górlée, Winfried Nöth, John Coletta, Stanley N. Salthé, John Pickering, Pedro Atã and João Queiroz. Part II (Habit as Action Schema) consist of chapters by Juuso-Ville Gustafsson and Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen, Atocha Aliseda, Lucia Santaella, Mats Bergman, Erkki Kilpinen, Donna E. West, and Frederik Stjernfelt. Part III (Mental Complexions of Habit) contains writings by Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen and Francesco Bellucci, Göran Sonesson, Vincent Colapietro, Sara Cannizzaro and Myrdene Anderson, Fernando Andacht, Lorenzo Magnani, Selene Arfini and Tommaso Bertolotti, Nathan Houser, Elize Bisanz and Scott Cunningham.

From its title, *Consensus on Peirce's Concept of Habit*, one may assume that the volume assuredly states the consolidation and settledness of Peirce's approach in semiotics. Indeed, one can say that the last decade has shown the possibility of arriving at a productive agreement in the interpretation of the core of Peirce's theory (in this respect I would particularly like to emphasize the work of Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen, Francesco Bellucci, Nathan Houser, Vincent Colapietro). This impression should be still kept apart from an association with a final consensus that is obviously impossible in case of Peirce.

The book is rich in fresh ideas and fine formulations. For illustration, a few hints in the form of quotations.

Myrdene Anderson (2016b: 8): “Understanding “self” as a manifestation of a bundle of habits, implicates “self-control” as a player. It happens that contemporary research in the social and behavioural sciences seems to back into the study of self-control, though seldom via Peirce’s insights. [...] Probably no single angle of habit will turn out to be so significant to the contemporary world as self-control.” Indeed, the topic of self-control is discussed in the papers by Gorlée, Nöth, Gustafsson and Pietarinen, Santaella, Bergman, Kilpinen, West, Stjernfelt. Pietarinen and Bellucci, Colapietro, Cannizzaro and Anderson, in this volume about habit.

Dinda Gorlée (2016: 31): “Habits show clear signs of improvement during each year of Peirce’s early work. [...] The original word habit comes from Aristotle’s right and wrong behavior, but transfigured by Peirce into the term of acquired (learned) habits as inferior sign to Thirdness.” An exact synopsis.

Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen and Francesco Bellucci (2016: 265): “The logical representative interpretant is a principle not itself a premise, a rule not itself subject to rules, a habit not itself a sign.” A habit may not be a sign.

It is important to keep the concept of habit separated from the concept of physical law. Habit is a locally acquired regularity, a rule of behaviour with its exceptions. By definition, a physical law is, in contrast, universal, without exceptions, not acquired.

The excellent volume by Donna West and Myrdene Anderson about the concept of *habit* is a part of the collective work on the conceptual apparatus of semiotics that semiotic science systematically has to engage in and accomplish.

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