

HABIT AS LOVE IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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Have you ever tried to learn to play an instrument, to frame out a wall, or to run a mile without stopping? If you have, you know this: there is no way to build a skill without practice, practice which forms habit. And have you ever tried to squash a propensity for nail-biting, nose-picking, or some comparable vice? If you have, you know this: habit, once established, is as if carved in stone.

As humans act, they form habits, and these habits become bound up with their ways of living, in the unconscious decisions they make in their daily lives. In a sense, habit may be thought of as one's 'default setting,' as the actions into which one slips without thinking. Kant would agree, and he goes on to assert that because action driven by habit is unconscious, it holds no moral significance. As he argues, habit "deprives even good actions of their moral value because it impairs the freedom of the mind and, moreover, leads to thoughtless repetition of the very same act and so becomes ridiculous."¹ But is this all that habit is: Newton's first law applied to human action? Simply because one customarily acts in a certain way, is that action then stripped of its moral significance? Does habit have no place in the consideration of ethics?

Saint Thomas Aquinas offers a different understanding of the nature of habit. For him, habit is less akin to a law of physics than to a garment with which one is clothed—it is something that a person possesses, as shown by the Latin etymology of 'habit': *habitus*, from *habere*, to have.² Rather than seeing habit as blind action, Thomas views it as the lens through which the will sees the world: "habit is that whereby we act when we will."³ On this view, habit does not enslave the self, nor is it separate from the moral implications of one's action. Action undertaken through habit is ultimately action which is willed, and, therefore, the agent is morally responsible for it. And, as many have observed, humans always act towards a goal, a goal which they desire. Habit,

¹ Cited from Clare Carlisle, "The Question of Habit in Theology and Philosophy: From Hexis to Plasticity," *Body and Society* 19, no.2-3 (May 2013): 43, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/10.1177/1357034X12474475>.

² Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, I-II, q.49, a.1, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2049.htm>.

³ *Ibid.*, I-II, q.49, a.3.

then, may be understood as one's accustomed, subconscious action, which is always aimed towards what he or she loves.

Even if habit is understood to be bound up with what one loves, with what one desires and strives toward rather than with simply what one does, a question remains: why is it important to understand habitual actions as morally charged?⁹ I would argue that to understand habit in terms of loves rather than of mechanism fundamentally affects the ways that we understand the nature of our actions in the world.

If theology concerns God, it concerns the ultimate target and goal of human love, according to Augustine.⁴ Since human action is propelled by desire,⁵ theology concerns the roots of human action as well: when action is propelled by desire for God, then theology is prepared to explicate that desire, and when action is driven by misguided desire, theology is equipped to understand why that desire is misguided and where it ought to be oriented. And if habit is understood as accustomed, subconscious action in light of what one loves, then if one's love is fixed upon God, his or her actions will grow out of that love. If love begets action, then right love begets right action.

We have stumbled into the realm of ethics, the realm of moral action—or, perhaps, we have been there all along. Ethics, it is understood, concerns right action. Right action stems from right love. If this is true, then in Christian thought there should be no concrete distinction between theology and ethics, because all human action is propelled by desire either for God, or for an idol, a thing which has taken the place of God in the human heart. On this view, action undertaken out of habit must be moral action. There is no such thing as neutral action—any and all action done by a person is a reflection of what he or she loves and is striving towards, and thus carries moral significance. As Jesus teaches in Luke's Gospel,

no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit...The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. (Luke 6:43-44, 45, ESV)

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, 3 (I.1).

⁵ Smith, *Love*, 11.

Jesus' teaching about action, the fruit of human desire, includes habit. Here, one's actions, habitual or otherwise, are windows opening into the heart, both reflecting and growing out of what he or she loves. So, in Jesus' framework, habit is not neutral action, as it is in Kant's. The mark of the virtuous person is not free and rational choice of the most ethical (or least inhumane) course of action out of many possible paths, but precisely the opposite. The virtuous person does not need to *choose* to do good, but does it by nature, because he or she has been clothed with and bound to the good. Virtue has become habit.

What, then is the role of habit in theology and ethics? Habit is where theology and ethics prove themselves—it is where belief and intellectual assent come together to incline the human to do good, based on his love for what is good. Or, in Thomistic terms, it is where the work of grace in human nature is demonstrated in action.

But a question remains: what about *bad* habits? Habit may be the place where the work of grace is demonstrated, but is every habit then a result of grace? Clearly not. And Augustine, in this realm, seems to take a dim view of habit in general, seeing it as imprisonment in sin. He mourns,

I am reabsorbed by my habitual practices. I am held in their grip. I weep profusely, but still I am held. Such is the strength of the burden of habit. Here I have the power to be, but do not wish it. There I wish to be, but lack the power.⁶

Augustine seems to take a dim view of habit here, decriing its power to enslave himself and others and to lead them astray. Should we take Augustine's warning here, and mistrust habit, rather than cultivate it?

It is not wrong to see habit as a form of 'slavery,' or bondage to a certain pattern of action. When one is bound to sin, he is a slave to sin, as is clear from both Augustine and Paul—but Paul speaks of the alternative to bondage to sin as bondage to God.

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?...But now that you have been set free from sin and have become

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, 218 (X.65).

slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. (Romans 6:16, 22)

For Paul, true freedom is not an absence of bondage, but bondage to the proper thing: to God, to the Good. And Augustine follows this as well, with his idea that true freedom of the will “is superior, inasmuch as it shall not be able to sin.”⁷ This freedom in bondage to righteousness is also accustomed action in light of love. Right action too is habit, but it is habit inclined to good, and not to evil.

⁷ Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2006), 1030 (XXII.30).

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