Proceedings
From Habits to Rituals †

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Abstract: My contribution aims to show the common source of habits and rituals, namely the fact that they are grounded on the same logic or process of repetition even though they may have different functions. After a brief introduction into the philosophy of rituals, I propose an interpretation of rituals as cultural activity which is based on the same mechanism of habits but it is expressed in a we-form.

Keywords: habit; ritual; gestural communication; I-Intentionality; We-Intentionality

1. Introduction

The traditional sense of habit (*Habitus*) is introduced by Aristotle to characterize the notion of "virtue". Virtue is a habit as disposition to face good or bad emotions and tendencies. Aquinas inherits the Aristotelian view and maintains that habit is not potency (i.e., a capacity) in that it makes us able or unable to act good or wrong. This notion of habit is defined also by Dewey who thinks that it is a human activity that is influenced by previous activity, namely it is acquired. The meaning of the term habit (*Consuetudo*), as constant repetition of an event or a behavior, refers to a mechanism that can be physical, psychological, biological, social etc.

Habits can be viewed from an individual mode or I-mode as they are idiosyncratic as regards personal behavior. Each person has her own habits i.e., how to perform certain routine actions. Habits have a very important function in individual life because they do not need special reflection or deliberation, they simply make our daily life easier, psychological neurosis apart. Our body has habits which we cannot control because they belong to the life of our organs, namely how our organs behave. Naturally, we can control habits concerning the satisfaction of basic natural needs. However, depending from natural and social environment, we develop different habits which organize the way to satisfy our human needs. The mechanism of habit is something we share with nature; it becomes highly visible if we are in touch with animals like dogs, cats, birds, horses among others.

Habits can be also in the We-mode, because if a person regularly goes out with a friend for jogging in a certain day and at a certain time, we do not say that the friends share a ritual but they share a habit. So, we can have many different habits we share with people and also with animals. For instance, if I go out with my dog at a certain hour early morning, me and my dog share a habit. However, habits have a "ritual" dimension, which corresponds to the set of acts the agent performs to satisfy the content of the habit in question. For instance, if I have the habit to drink coffee soon after I wake up, the content is this performance and the ritual is the set of acts necessary to satisfy my habit, namely to prepare my coffee, to choose the cup, to add or not sugar or anything else, etc.

2. Rituals

Anthropology, ethnology, sociology, social psychology traditionally investigate rituals. Kevin Schilbrack edited a very interesting book [1], where different philosophical perspective are considered also starting from classical thought to analyze rituals as a source of knowledge.

We use the word "rite" or "ritual" referring especially to religion and myth to indicate that aspect of it that makes the religious experience possible in the mystical dimension. The ritual is presented as a set of acts or normatively codified practices that form cultural patterns of a given society and are a representation of the values and standards of the transmission function, the institutionalization of roles, identity and social cohesion. Recall anthropological studies of Ernesto De Martino. He stressed that the experience of the precariousness of human life (rather than natural events and therefore stereotyped behaviors) offers reassuring models to follow by building the same tradition. The sociologist Emile Durkheim analyzed the transition from the initial part of the rite to a social function which strengthens the internal community ties; so also the functionalist anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. Instead anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and Meyer Fortes consider primary social and cultural role of the myth that can extend later in the religious sphere.

3. Extra-Ordinary Communication and Rituals

Rituals are social practices or habits in an "institutionalized" We-mode [2,3]. This We-mode assumes a peculiar form in human beings who, differently from apes, are able to have collective intentionality in the form of cooperation [4]. Following this result, Jürgen Habermas maintains that the ritual is a variant of gestural communication; it is a mimetic form of communication that produces a world of symbolic meanings that are common and shared [5,6]. In the rhythmic movements of the dance we see different modalities of iconic representations. But ritual behavior is different from other forms of iconic representation as it entails a peculiar kind of self-referentiality: the rite does not refer to something external, identifiable in the world. The way of responding to the presence of fire by expressing the word "fire!" with the corresponding linguistic force is a simple example of cooperative behavior which inform others that we are in a dangerous situation. They deserve to elaborate those vulnerable situations that characterize passages from a social status to another and cooperation to face challenges from the external world [7–9]. It seems that Habermas overcomes the distinction introduced by Tomasello between human and animals behavior because rituals intended in a communicative sense are common to human and animals beings which must face every day the contingencies of their natural and social environment. The function of rituals is to make individual motivations shareable and to solve the conflict between individual self-affirmation and collectivity. Gestural communication which characterizes rituals represents, from the social pragmatics perspective, a new form of intelligent, useful cooperation. As Durkheim has shown in his elucidating analysis, rituals reveal their function in the re-generation of solidarity as well as in the self-thematization of the communitarian identity.

4. We-Intentionality and Rituals

The set of acts which characterizes human habits can be institutionalized to form the cultural rituals that belong to human life-forms [10]. A very famous example of description of a ritual is the marriage presented by John Searle. I move from his latest book *Making the Social World*, because he modifies his perspective shifting from social practices as games, uniquely based on the assignment of function (Status Function), to the fundamental function of language for the construction of social reality [11]. First, we need to be moved to act in a certain way. We-Intentionality works when we want to do something together so that we cooperate to achieve our common goal. Collective intentionality presents a weak form (collective recognition) and a strong form (cooperation). Both are crucial for rituals, in our case marriage. Collective recognition means that the couple simply accepts the institution of marriage prior to actually getting married. But, the actual marriage ceremony is an example of active cooperation, in which the couple enters in a new social situation acquiring new

social statuses consequently, through the speech act of promise. The social context requires the speech act of declaration from the part of the institutional figure who has the suitable deontic powers to celebrate the rite and to ascribe the new status to the couple.

5. Conclusions

Human rituals requires symbolization that can be represented in different forms: the attribution of a symbolic value to certain objects, animals and procedures. The object acquires a status function and counts as something that is recognized to mean something else. For instance, the ceremony to award diplomas requires the students to dress the robe which means the passage to a higher level of education and a potential access to a prestigious university. In bullfight, people assign a symbolic value to the bull and to the peculiar uniform of the toreador. In this case, to kill a bull is not considered a good practice in every culture (like eating lamb for Easter). On the contrary, to acquire a higher level of education can be universally considered a good practice. It seems that language (written or spoken) is a component that is not always present in rituals. Let's think to dance as a performance largely present in rituals. Differently, in the tea ceremony the ritual focuses on a codified set of sentences as well as on some specifically objects used to prepare tea, so that they acquire a certain value and on the meaning of the very ritual.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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