

Abstract

The Movement of Habit: On Ritual and Activism [†]

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[†] Presented at the IS4SI 2017 Summit DIGITALISATION FOR A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY, Gothenburg,
Sweden, 12–16 June 2017.

Published: 9 June 2017

In one of the most distinctive readings of the concept of habit, Felix Ravaisson cut through its common association with passivity by posing the problem as one of distance: considered as conscious reflection, an inclination may be said to tend towards an end or object outside it; considered as habitual, however, an inclination may be said to be much closer to the actuality it seeks to reach. As the automatism of an inclination increases, the movement and the goal almost touch each other. The result is a type of immediate creation. Something comes to being, a fusion of the real and the ideal, of the personal and the impersonal without the necessary intervention of a consciousness to will it. As it proliferates, the habit creates a world by allowing a manifold of influences to coalesce as one consistent behaviour. We might, after Peirce, call this consistency a ‘sign’ or ‘third’, born of the junction of the potential and the actual. Or, to borrow from Spinoza, we may call it expression. Far from being merely passive, then, habit may be said to infinitely approximate a supreme form of spontaneity, not unlike the ‘intelligent intuition’ that Kant had reserved for God. In other words, habit sheds its connection with psychologism to become properly metaphysical. In this paper, I examine the usefulness of such a metaphysical concept of habit for an understanding of ritual and ritualistic practice, especially in the context of recent earth activism supported by indigenous spiritualist imaginaries. I explore how ritual, tied both to the habit of communicating with nature but also with the understanding that nature produces itself in its habits, opens up the possibility of actively shaping social and political realities by ‘expressing’ or ‘signifying’ a merger with the free and creative force of the cosmos.

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



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