

Habits as Spiritual Affectivity*

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between emotions and habits within the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, challenging the modern identification of habit with mere routine or neurobiological automatism. Drawing on the insights of Magda Arnold and Leonardo Polo, the author argues that while emotions are sensory, preconscious ‘appraisals’ of the environment, habits—specifically virtues—represent a higher, spiritual form of affectivity. By characterizing habit as a stable disposition oriented toward the ‘intellectual good’, the text positions virtue as ‘active feedback’ that perfects the human faculty. Unlike transient sensory passions, these spiritual habits provide a profound, stable emotional tone, such as serenity or joy, which guides and moderates lower sensory responses. Ultimately, the author posits that habits are not ‘cold’ cognitive structures but a ‘hyper-feeling’ that constitutes the most intimate and elevated dimension of human emotional experience.

Keywords: Habit (*héxis*), Virtue, Spiritual affectivity, Appraisal, Disposition.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Emotion is usually understood as a phenomenon linked to sensation, as a type of reaction to a sensory stimulus. That reaction can be considered an automatic

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response, in which experience is not essential. But emotions, at least in human beings, are accompanied by experience. That is why, in some fields, a distinction is made between ‘emotion’ and ‘feeling’, with the latter term referring to the consciousness or experience that accompanies emotions.¹ In any case, this experience is usually conceived as a sensory experience.

The introduction of consciousness raises serious philosophical problems. For much of modern philosophy, knowledge and conscious experience are identified, but this is not the case in classical philosophy. Both Plato and Aristotle make a clear distinction between sensory knowledge and intellectual knowledge. While the former is important for animal life, the latter enables us to know reality as such. While the former is mediated by the matter of the sensory organ, only a potency that is not mediated by the limited receptivity of an organ can be open to the knowledge of being—that is, to truth. In this sense, a clear distinction can be made in human beings between a sensory dimension of knowledge and a spiritual dimension.

This does not imply that sensory knowledge is false. Through it we know reality, but we do not know it as real. This approach allows for true sensory knowledge, which can be, however, unconscious, since what we now call consciousness is, in these ancient authors, linked above all to intellectual knowledge.

What we now call emotions belongs, in the ancient approach, to the sensory inclinations. Two types are usually distinguished: desires (*epithymía*) and impulses (*thymós*), or, using Arnold’s terminology, *impulse emotions* and *contending emotions*. Latin authors referred to them respectively as *concupiscibilis* and *irascibilis*. But this leaves open the question of whether a spiritual affectivity also exists.

Arnold distinguishes between emotion and feeling, defining the latter as conscious reflection on emotion. “Feelings are reactions to a subjective experience, while emotions are reactions to objects or situations.”² For her, both are “affective responses to the environment, based on the intuitive appraisal that something is good or bad for us. The only difference is that feeling is based upon the immediate, intuitive estimate of a particular aspect of an object or situation, while emotion is based on the immediate, intuitive estimate of the object as it affects us and demand us a particular action.”³ But in this view, consciousness may seem cold, so to speak, and devoid of any emotional tone, since such a tone would come only from sensory powers.

It seems clear that possessing spiritual intelligence influences our emotional

¹Cf. J. I. MURILLO, *Is There Room for the Will in Neuroscientific Research*, in *Moral Behavior and Free Will: A Neurobiological and Philosophical Approach*, ed. by J. J. Sanguinetti, A. Acerbi, J. A. Lombo, IF Press, Morolo 2011.

²M. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality*, vol. 1, Columbia University Press, New York 1960, p. 81.

³*Ibidem*, p. 88.

experiences. The rational animal is capable, for example, of a form of fear that presupposes the perception of nothingness, as in the case of the anxiety described by Heidegger;⁴ it can also experience a sadness rooted in the awareness of the emptiness of time, as in boredom, or anger in the face of injustice, as in the case of indignation. But, at least at first glance, as emotions, all of them seem to reside in our sensory faculties. There have, of course, been descriptions of feelings that include spiritual feelings. One of the most interesting is that of Max Scheler.⁵ However, in his case, as befits a good phenomenologist, feelings are studied from the perspective of consciousness. But is it possible to accept a properly spiritual affectivity in a psychology and anthropology, such as Arnold's, of an Aristotelian or Thomistic tradition?

2 HABIT AND VIRTUE

According to Aristotle, the soul contains passions (*páthe*), capacities (*dynámeis*), and habits (*héxeis*). By 'passions', he refers to what modern psychology and neuroscience call emotions and affectivity.

Aristotle's emphasis on habits is well known. His ethics revolves largely around virtues and vices, both of which are habits. However, the notion of habit has been almost entirely abandoned among those who advocate for the importance of virtue. The reason for this neglect lies largely in its troubled history and its consequences for the use of the term in modern languages. Today, in neuroscience and psychology as well as in colloquial language, we tend to identify habit with the acquisition of routines and automatisms, whose value depends on their outcomes.⁶ There are positive automatisms because they free up consciousness and can be used for the purposes we set out to achieve, and there are others that limit or enslave us. Some examples of the former are those we bring into play when carrying out complex activities such as driving a car. An extreme example of the latter is addiction, but we can also apply this to all those routines that lead us where we do not want to go or where it is not in our best interest, or that produce undesirable biases. One of the most influential characterizations of habit in neuroscience holds that it can be experimentally recognized to the extent that the animal becomes insensitive to the devaluation of the reward. Even if the reward is smaller, the habituated animal continues to respond in the same way.⁷

⁴Cf. M. HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 1967, § 40, pp. 184 ss.

⁵Cf. S. SÁNCHEZ-MIGALLÓN, J. M. GIMÉNEZ-AMAYA, *Phenomenological Analysis of the Emotional Life and a Note on Its Neurobiological Correlation*, «Scientia et Fides», 2/2 (2014), pp. 47-66.

⁶See A. M. GRAYBIEL, *Habits, Rituals, and The Evaluative Brain*, «Annual Review of Neuroscience», 31/1 (2008), pp. 359-387.

⁷Cf. A. DICKINSON, *Actions and Habits: The Development of Behavioural Autonomy*, «Philosophy-

It is understandable that many, considering this situation, believe we should avoid using the term ‘habit’ to describe virtue. But this decision has some drawbacks.

First, it eliminates a common category that can be applied to both vice and virtue. What, then, is virtue? What is its place in the human being? Because a second consequence is, in fact, the risk that theories of virtue cannot take root in a psychology and anthropology that takes them into account. Both disadvantages, moreover, correspond to the loss of the original and complete meaning of a concept that is of great interest to contemporary psychology and neuroscience, even though it seems to challenge some of their traditional assumptions.⁸ Let us recall that the father of the concept of habit is Aristotle and that, therefore, his way of understanding it is not simply one among many. On the other hand, there are already voices proposing that returning to the primitive notion is more fruitful for understanding human behavior in scientific terms as well.⁹

One of the most detailed and rigorous treatises on the nature of habits is found in Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*, which presents it as a premise of his treatise on virtue.¹⁰ According to Aquinas, habit belongs to the category of quality, specifically to a type of quality we call dispositions. A characteristic of dispositions is that they can be good or bad. Something can be well or poorly disposed with respect to its end. Within dispositions, habits are stable dispositions that are difficult to lose. In fact, this is their specific distinction, which sets them apart, for example, from merely sensory dispositions and brings them closer to the spiritual condition of the human being. Indeed, for Thomas Aquinas, although there are habits rooted in the sensitive appetites—such as those that dispose us in one way or another regarding the passions—all of them depend on reason and are ordered by it. Vice and virtue are not habits of a being, like health or illness, but of its powers, and they are distinguished because they dispose them badly or well, respectively, regarding their end.

Characterizing habit according to the categorical framework as a quality—specifically, as something useful—is, in my opinion, neither the final word nor the most important one, since it offers us information that is more logical than anthropological. Defining it as a disposition adds something more, since this brings into its definition the relationship with the end, that is, teleology.¹¹ But let us

ical Transactions of the Royal Society of London», 308/1135 (1985), pp. 67–78.

⁸J. I. MURILLO, *Virtue, Habit and Neuroscience*, «Pensamiento», 77/295 (2021), pp. 501–510.

⁹See J. BERNACER, J. I. MURILLO, *The Aristotelian Conception of Habit and Its Contribution to Human Neuroscience*, «Frontiers in Human Neuroscience», 8/883 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00883>.

¹⁰Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 49–54.

¹¹Cf. J. I. MURILLO, *Health as a Norm and Principle of Intelligibility*, in *Natural Law: Historical, Systematic and Juridical Approaches*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle 2008, pp. 361–378.

remember that in Aristotelian thought, the approach that most closely approximates reality is the one that considers it in terms of the act. For Aristotle, the act par excellence, *enérgeia*, is the perfect activity, which possesses its own end.¹² The prime example is the act of understanding, but it can be applied to all vital activities. Moreover, its exercise distinguishes living, animate beings from those that are not. And to anyone who seeks to contradict us by reminding us that the object of Aristotelian metaphysics is the study of substance, one may reply that the highest substance of metaphysics is precisely *enérgeia*, the most vital and supreme act: the intellect that understands itself.¹³

Thomas Aquinas, even though he frequently employs the language of the venerable Platonic tradition, is also a philosopher of act. In fact, it is commonly acknowledged that his most decisive contribution to metaphysics consists in understanding being as a first act (*actus essendi*) and essence as the potency corresponding to it; a potency that translates into a plurality of powers and of operations. In this way, Aquinas expands the Aristotelian notion of act with important consequences for both metaphysics and anthropology.

This primacy of act, in the case of operations, leads us to take an interest in their end (*télos*), that is, in their object. It is well known that potentialities are specified by their acts, and these acts are specified by their objects.¹⁴ If we distinguish a faculty that we call 'sight', it is because a specific object corresponds to it, which we call 'color'; although this has to do with what physics studies as color, it differs from it in that the former is defined as an intentional object and, consequently, as a means of knowing. As can be seen, by the term 'object' we do not refer in this context to things, but to the aspect through which the living being relates to reality. Consequently, color as an object of sight should not be understood here, therefore, as a physical reality, but as the way in which reality appears in vision.

In the case of habits, attending to the object leads Thomas Aquinas to distinguish numerous virtues, which are the elevation and rational orientation of each of the dimensions of human activity. In contrast, understanding habit as an automatism obscures the end that specifies it as a disposition. In this way, behavior becomes a mere result that must be evaluated externally, based on its consequences, and cannot be evaluated in and of itself.

¹²Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, IX,6, 1048b 19-37.

¹³Cf. *ibidem*, XII,7, 1072b 25-30.

¹⁴Cf. IDEM, *De anima*, II,4, 415a 14-24.

3 PASSIONS AS DISPOSITIONS: AN ANALOGY BETWEEN FEELING AND HABIT

However, in his theory of action, the treatise on habits, vices, and virtues is preceded by that on passions, which is the term that encompasses, with some nuances, what we today call emotions.

One of Magda Arnold's contributions lies in recovering for psychology and neuroscience certain forgotten aspects of the Aristotelian tradition. Among these, of particular importance is the thesis that emotions derive from a preconscious sensory judgment (*appraisal*), which the Aristotelian tradition, beginning with Avicenna, attributes to a faculty of intermediate sensibility, dependent on the imagination or fantasy, called, in the case of human beings, the cogitative faculty.¹⁵ Hereafter, we will use the terms emotion, feeling, and passion without making too many distinctions, even though Arnold distinguishes between them.

In my opinion, reclaiming the cogitative as a capacity for valuation with respect to the living being is of particular importance for emphasizing the cognitive nature of emotions, which sometimes tends to be obscured when their character as automatic responses is emphasized and the principle that triggers them is reduced to the mere condition of a stimulus. *Appraisal* is a sensory and unconscious judgment that determines the value of what is known to the living being.

There are many classifications of emotions and feelings. However, despite its simplicity, it is difficult to find one that, like the one offered by Thomas Aquinas, distinguishes them by virtue of their ends and objects. Passions have to do with appetites, and these refer to the end as good. Therefore, passions diversify according to the various evaluations that the living being can make of its environment by virtue of sensory knowledge.

But the passions are sensory, and the tendency that derives from intellectual knowledge is the will. And often the will presents itself as a cold decision that imposes itself—or succumbs—to passionate movements. Should we exclude every emotional or passionate component from the spirit? Is there any relationship between passions and habits?

I will draw on two observations by Leonardo Polo to guide my response. Turning to this author in this context is appropriate because, particularly in his treatment of knowledge, tendencies, and the will, Polo presents his contributions as a continuation of those of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.

The first observation is that, according to Polo, there is an analogy between feeling and habit. "Feelings are passions because the faculty is the active principle

¹⁵Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 78, a. 4; H. WOLFSON, *The Internal Senses in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew Philosophic Texts*, «Harvard Theological Review», 28 (1935), pp. 69-133; F. J. ROMERO CARRASQUILLO, *An Abstractionist Correction of Avicenna's Theory of Intentionality in the Early Averroes*, «Acta Philosophica», 20/2 (2011), pp. 405-420.

of the operation. The commensurability of the operation with the object allows us to consider the faculty from the perspective of the operation. This consideration implies passion for the faculty. That is to say, the faculty is an active potency that passes into act.¹⁶ But the act reverts to the faculty. Feeling is that relation of the operation to the faculty, for otherwise the accord could not be perceived. Now, if the faculty is, in turn, incapable of a new activity, then it makes sense to say that feelings are passions.”¹⁷

Psychic activity is characterized by the fact that it reverts back in one way or another into the faculty. Whether or not the end is attained translates into information about how we are disposed with respect to it. Polo attributes this sentimental condition to all cognitive faculties. “Feelings, in a certain way, resemble knowing, but improperly so because they are not acts. They are indications regarding the faculty.”¹⁸ We can speak of a sentimental or emotional tone of cognitive capacities, which may be called dispositions. Thus, for example, sight may rest on certain objects and be disturbed by others, not to say in the case of imagination. It is clear that these passions also have to do with aesthetics.¹⁹

But the integration of knowledge and the evaluation of the cognitive faculty refers rather to whether what appears to and affects the living being is advantageous or harmful to it. The passions or emotions listed by Thomas Aquinas are those that correspond not only to a specific activity, such as those of the sensory faculties (seeing, hearing, imagining, for example), but to the living being’s overall disposition and its orientation toward behavior.

But these sensory dispositions that we call emotions and that manifest as sketches of behavior are, above all, reactions of the living being, which do not succeed in generating a stable disposition. Furthermore, although higher living beings can learn and improve their valuations, the emotions that derive from them cannot improve in the strict sense.

4 HABITS AS SPIRITUAL AFFECTIVITY

This leads us to the second observation: “Habit is something like hyper-feeling, or also: feelings are what the organic faculties have in common with a virtue, with

¹⁶Polo’s way of expressing himself seems to contrast with Thomas Aquinas’s thesis that in human beings there are only two active powers: the active intellect and the vegetative powers. In my opinion, this is merely a different and reconcilable perspective. For Thomas Aquinas, the sensory faculties are passive powers because they need to be activated in order to perceive. For Polo, the sensory faculty is active insofar as its receptivity depends on an organ which, moreover, is animated by virtue of vegetative life. For Polo, however, as for Aquinas, the potential intellect and the will are pure potential powers.

¹⁷L. POLO, *Curso de teoría del conocimiento*, vol. I, OC 4, EUNSA, Pamplona 2015⁴, p. 229.

¹⁸*Ibidem*, p. 230.

¹⁹Cf. *ibidem*, p. 231.

a habit (*héxis*).²⁰ Following Thomas Aquinas on this point, Polo clarifies: “The organic faculties are not only dynamic operative principles, but the operations revert to them in some way. But that reversion of the act does not perfect the faculty insofar as it does not remain in the faculty in an intrinsic, strictly actualizing manner of the potency. But there is a trace of habit in affectivity.”²¹

Operative habits are a form of feedback for the faculty. In this, they resemble sensible feelings. In the case of voluntary acts, which give rise to a course of action, the voluntary potency—and even those potencies moved by it—are disposed for better or worse with respect to the good. By the nature of the voluntary act, which involves the self, these dispositions do not belong to a particular faculty but rather qualify the whole human being and his orientation toward the good. The absence of sensory coloring cannot make us forget that we are dealing with a higher level of what, at the sensory level, we call emotion or feeling.

Thomas Aquinas distinguishes between two types of dispositions: those that are not stable and those that are, which are what he properly calls habits.²² The reason for this stability lies in the fact that they reside in the spiritual powers or, at least, depend on them. Indeed, like passion, habit is an orientation toward the good, but, unlike passion or sensory emotion, it is a stable orientation.

On the other hand, while emotion responds to the sensory evaluation of the good, habit responds to a more or less adequate intellectual assessment and, therefore, does not refer to what merely appears to be good, but to what we judge to be truly so.

It should come as no surprise that our conception of emotions and affectivity is drawn primarily from sensory emotions, for, as Aristotle points out, our knowledge takes sensory knowledge as its starting point, which is therefore more evident to us. But to accuse habits or reason of being cold or devoid of any sentimental tone leads us to forget that they are a set of dispositions that constitute an authentic and profound spiritual affectivity.

Furthermore, this affectivity, which belongs to a higher level—that of the spirit—is not only more intimate than sensory affectivity but also guides it. Moreover, it is not alien to experience and, at times, can be consciously experienced. Indeed, it does not seem an exaggeration to assert that our ordinary emotional experience depends more on spiritual dispositions and attitudes than on those that arise directly from the senses. Thus, for example, even in situations as intense as combat, courage moderates sensory fear to the point of rationally moderating anger and making the attack compatible with respect for the enemy.

The presence of vicious habits often results in rigidity or a restlessness that

²⁰*Ibidem.*

²¹*Ibidem.*

²²Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 49, a. 2, ad 3.

reveals a lack of adaptation to the environment. The emotional tone of bad habits can alert us to our errors or increase our confusion. In the case of virtue, however, we can think of the joy and serenity that accompany virtues, which can even reach exaltation in the case, for example, of virtues such as friendship or charity.

To these differences between sensible emotion and habits, we must add that virtues can always grow, enabling us to attain higher goods. This allows, in the case of the rational animal, for feelings to become increasingly deeper and more elevated as well. In any case, we must not forget that, while intellectual habits can be acquired with a single act, moral habits can be lost because, in the mortal condition, they are never definitively acquired.

For all these reasons, without wishing in any way to limit the study of spiritual affectivity—or the spiritual dimension of affectivity—to these points, I dare to affirm that there is a close relationship between emotions and habits and that the latter, particularly moral virtue, more fully realize what is only sketched out in the former.

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