The Value of Habit: On Skillful Knowhow as a Source of Resilience, Resistance, and Positive Social Transformation

By

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Habit has become an increasingly important theme in fields where unjust forms of power among social identity groups and everyday oppression are central concerns. In the critical philosophy of race, feminism, and related areas, contemporary discussions of habit have focused on destructive features of habit, considering habitual modes of action in cases of privilege, ignorance, and similar vices of dominant social groups. So far, habitual action has only been explored in its destructive cases, and framed as a mode of action that must be avoided, a view that is true of habitual ignorance and privilege, but not necessarily of habit in general. As such, the value that habit bears will not be the same across the board. There is a distinct and positive role for habitual action in resilience and in efforts to transform social injustices, among those whose dehumanization and disvalue is ordinary and habitual, in an unjust mainstream. Drawing on insights made by Frantz Fanon and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I use resources from feminist phenomenology, pragmatism, and neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics to show how habitual action can serve the aims of resistance against social injustice. By showing that claims on habitual action must depend on the relative power of the subject position that someone inhabits, I develop an interpretation that has not yet been adequately explored in social theory. Comparing the potentially positive role of habit in social existence to the role of habit in musical expertise, I show how habitual modes of action can enable the development of critical consciousness, resilience, and valuable forms of resistance against structural injustices. A habitual mode of action can function as a source of resilience and resistance that ought to be retained, as a necessary component of practices that can sustain alternative forms of normality and positive social transformation.

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