

Habitus

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Classical sources of the concept

Habitus is a concept originally introduced by Aristotle, re-worked by Thomas Aquinas and used sporadically and unsystematically by some 19th century European social theorists. The notion was revived and recruited for understanding the practical embodied bases of action by the French sociologist Marcel Mauss and the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. But it was only in the work of the French sociologist/anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu that the concept was re-introduced with a more systematic intent into social theory as a viable analytic tool for the job of accounting for the cognitive components of action.

In its initial Aristotelian formulation, the notion of habitus is captured in the idea of *hexis* (habitus is the usual Latin translation of this Greek word). This refers to the state of possessing (or “having”, Latin *habere*) an acquired, trained disposition to engage in certain modes of activity when encountering particular objects or situations. For instance, the essential capacity to regularly engage in virtuous action was understood, in the context of Aristotelian ethics, to be the primary exemplification of habitus. Aquinas would refine the application of the concept to ethical reasoning in further specifying the nature and content of the moral virtues. In Aquinas’s rendering, the full virtuous personality is one who has, through effort and training, cultivated the proficiency to act in the morally required manner without effort; that is, a person for whom moral

behavior becomes *second nature*.

The central problem in the sociology of knowledge

In the sociology of knowledge an attempt is made to account for the social or external bases of thought. This has a long tradition in Western social theory but the two main classical sources are the essay on *Primitive Classification* written by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim and his nephew Marcel Mauss in 1902 and the monograph translated into English as *Ideology and Utopia* (1936) authored by the German sociologist Karl Mannheim. The Durkheim and Mauss essay is known for its bold claim that the categorical relations with which persons organize their understanding of the world of things are modeled after the social relations that govern the classification of persons as members of distinct groups. Mannheim, for his part, emphasized how the agonistic context of intellectual fields molds the content of ideological systems. In both of these statements a link between social structure and structure of systems of thought is made, but the mechanisms that mediate this linkage remain murky.

Habitus as a solution to the central problem

It was in his attempt to rebuild and rework this intellectual tradition—leaving behind its most egregious distortions and over-simplifications—that Pierre Bourdieu first resorted to the notion of habitus. His initial source of inspiration was an admittedly odd one: a book written by the art historian Irwin Panofsky (*Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*) arguing how the aesthetic rules of composition of Gothic architecture—most clearly appreciated in the construction of the Gothic Cathedral—were isomorphic to the habits of thought and learning inculcated in the medieval scholastic institution—most clearly appreciated in the construction of the *Summa*, the major scholarly treatise in which systems of ideas were expounded. In a postface written for the book in 1967, Bourdieu is struck by how, in resorting to the Aristotelian notion of habitus to make

sense of this correspondence, Panofsky is able to partially avoid the dilemma that plagued traditional sociology of knowledge proposals of a similar sort.

Habitus and the theory of action

The connection between position and disposition

Bourdieu would go on to systematize the idea of habitus for a more general understanding of the nature of social action in his subsequent work. In Bourdieu's rendering, which creatively melds a wide range of influences from Piagetian psychology, phenomenology, the history of epistemology and onwards to Levi-Straussian structuralism, habitus is an acquired system of schemes that allow for everyday instances of perception, categorization and the production of action and most importantly for the production of mundane judgments (e.g. judgments of moral propriety or impropriety, of likelihood or unlikelihood, of certainty or uncertainty, or judgments of taste such as likes and dislikes). The habitus endows action with a finality that is immanent or implicit in practice and which only appears as if it had been planned before-hand after the fact. The habitus thus subsumes the rationalistic theory of action inherited from utilitarian thought as an unnatural exception rather than the rule from which an understanding of action should be built.

In Bourdieu's rendering, the habitus is not just the producer of actions and reactions, but it is a *product* of the environmental conditions that the person encounters during ontogenetic development. In its essential status as a being open to (being modified by) the world, the person is bound to internalize the immanent necessities inscribed in that world in the form of habitus. As a form of internalized necessity the habitus biases our implicit micro-anticipations of the kind of world that we will encounter at each moment expecting the future to preserve the experiential correlations encountered in the past. This linkage of habitus to social position thus makes the concept of habitus inseparable

from a theory of the differential distribution of social positions which in Bourdieu's work takes the (natural) form of a field theory.

There has been some debate as to whether the habitus is a "collectivist" concept or is instead an "individualist" solution to the classic problem in the sociology knowledge. The main point to note here is that in proposing that habitus emerges from experience Bourdieu moves the debate beyond the traditional parameters of the sociology of knowledge because he locates the relevant realm upon which (whatever) regularities can be observed back into the (non-arbitrary) features of the world. In this respect he moves beyond the impasse produced by the Durkheimian assumption of the arbitrary nature of the cognitive components of action and perception which came to bedevil cultural anthropology.

Adaptation, anticipation and change

Because the habitus is the product of adaptation to conditions, it heavily predisposes the person to recreate the very same conditions under which the system of skills and dispositions that are constitutive of it can be most profitably put to use. In this respect, the habitus is heavily weighted towards the past, and biases choices in a way that lead to the conservation and the constant reinforcement of already acquired capacities. the habitus predisposes the person to be attracted to, like, or even "love" that which is already best fit to it, even if this ends up in fact being an objectively over-determined future trajectory over which a person has very little control (*amor fati*). The (tacit) recognition of this situation to skill match or mismatch is in effect the most obvious form of "practical reason" stored in the habitus. Conversely, the habitus predisposes the person to avoid those environments and situations for which it is not well adapted. In this way, the habitus predisposes the person to in effect refuse that which is in fact objectively unavailable. By refusing that which is objectively refused to it, the habitus

makes a “virtue of necessity.”

In its capacity as already cumulated (and thus “sunk-in”) skill, the habitus carries with it a heavy load of inertia and only changes when external conditions are so dramatically transformed as to permanently disrupt the capacity of the habitus to implement those strategies that worked in the past. This process of re-adaptation and re-skilling is necessarily disruptive, and to some extent traumatic. Insofar as the habitus encompasses that which is most essentially a person’s self, any rejection or transformation of the things that we do as second nature is in effect a rejection or a transformation of what a person “is” in the most fundamental sense.

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See also: Action, Philosophical Theory of, Embodied Cognition, Knowing How vs. Knowing That, Mirror Neurons and Motor Cognition in Action Explanation, Rule-Following, Tacit knowledge.

Further Reading

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