
Habit and Emotion: John Dewey's Contribution to the Theory of Change

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Résumé

Abstract

In constructing their theoretical framework, American institutionalist authors Thorstein Veblen and John Commons built upon the concept of habit developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey, exponents of the pragmatist movement. Peirce, James and Dewey see habit as a generally effective means of guiding action, although Dewey's analysis focuses more on habit transformation and transaction than on habit itself. At the heart of this process of transformation is emotion.

Dewey proposes a rich and complex non-dual definition of emotion as a central facet of the notion of "experience" and the "transactional" method described above. This definition was long overlooked in subsequent literature in the field because Dewey did not, in the academic sense of the term, offer a genuine "theory" of emotion comparable to those formulated by Bain (1859) or James (1884). Furthermore, his concept is the fruit of a long process of reflection which began in the mid-1890s (Dewey, 1894, 1895, 1896), and upon which he expanded at length in his later writings: *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922); *Experience and Nature* (1925); *Qualitative Thought* (1930) and *Art as Experience* (1934).

A number of recent authors have participated in the rediscovery and re-evaluation of Dewey's contribution to discussions of emotion (for instance, Garrison, 2003; Tiles, 2003; Mendonça, 2012; Pappas, 2016; Crippen, 2018; Quéré, 2018). Dewey's analysis is invaluable because it takes into account the different phases which make up the emotional process - Dewey views this process as a continuous, dynamic activity. As such it serves to unify a variety of theoretical strands emanating from different academic disciplines (psychology, sociology, biology, philosophy, neurosciences etc.) which deal with the subject of emotion (Mendonça, 2012).

In Dewey's theory, emotion plays the key role of "signaling" the presence of a crisis. Initially taking the form of "primary" or "raw" emotion, it drives us and *makes us feel* that a response is required to the difficulty encountered by our habitual behavior. More than mere signals, emotions also act as "pivots" and "guides" which give *direction* to the reconfiguration of old habits. Emotions become crucial when the organism has a tendency to act in a certain manner in a certain situation, but does not have the resources to do so. Old habits are thus shown to be incompatible with the situation at hand: action is hindered or constrained. In

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such cases, as per the transactional model, both the environment and the way in which the individual adopts to it will undergo a transformation. Emotion is therefore both a driving force and a force for cohesion. Emotion signals the need for change, and at the same time is an active agent in habit reconfiguration.

In this communication, we argue that John Dewey offers a highly instructive analysis of the transformative power of individual habits *via* emotion. We begin by examining the "transactional" scope of the notion of habit, and how it fits into the broader notion of experience. We then look at the specific role of emotion in changing habits: emotion heralds the need for change, while also acting as an active agent in the reconfiguration of habits. Finally, we consider the implications of Dewey's ideas on habit and emotion in the light of more recent theoretical developments in behavioral economics and "nudge theory." Human behavior is rife with habits, some of which are bad. Building upon behavioral economics, so-called "nudge" policies seek to influence the decisions people make (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), with a particular focus on "bad" habits and the many ways in which they have a negative impact on individual and social well-being. Nudge theory shares certain similarities with the theory of habits advanced by Dewey. Nevertheless, the similarities between Dewey's thinking and nudge theory are undoubtedly less significant than what sets them apart. In particular, we show that unlike the proponents of behavioral economics and nudge theory – who tend to view emotion as a form of bias affecting rational decision-making processes, and thus a bias which can be used to steer behavior – Dewey insists that emotion plays its own key role in the process of deliberation, quite apart from reason; emotion and reason are thus complementary facets of intelligence.

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