

Victor Egger: habit, repetition, and the unconscious

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1. *The life of consciousness*

Victor Egger (1848-1909) was a multifaceted, original thinker and a member of the French intellectual scene at the turn of the twentieth century. At the end of the nineteenth century, when teaching at the Sorbonne, he enjoyed a certain degree of fame. His works were read and in some cases even quoted by such notable figures as William James (1890), Sigmund Freud (1995), Henri Bergson (Roni 2016), and Ferdinand de Saussure (Joseph 2010; 2012: 288-291). Following his death, however, he was suddenly forgotten (Roni 2019: 10).

The nature of Egger's work was certainly peculiar. He wrote about thirty articles and short essays and made available the transcriptions of his university lectures (covering the period from 1900 to 1909), but he published only one book, *La parole intérieure [Inner Speech]*, which coincided with his doctoral thesis (Egger 1881). It is above all because of the original and partly controversial theses contained in that book that Egger has once again begun to be cited and remembered in recent works, including in the field of psycholinguistics (see for example Lukatela *et al.* 2004).

Not only his means of expression but also his training and his own thinking show that his was a path that was not entirely ordinary. After graduating in philosophy, he pursued a doctorate in literature under the supervision of Paul Janet. It was during this period that he became interested in studying psychology and physiology. Taking an approach that we would today call "interdisciplinary", Egger dedicated himself to a central object of investigation: human interiority, in relation to which he explored such apparently diverse themes as language, time, memory, dreams, death and, last but not least, habit (Roni 2019: 13-14).

¹ Paragraphs 1 and 2 have to be ascribed to Marco Piazza, whereas 3 and 4 to Sofia Sandreschi de Robertis.

Cognisant of the most recent developments in psychopathology and physiology, Egger never completely detached himself from his spiritualist philosophical training. He had been a pupil of Albert Lemoine at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris (as well as being a student of Lachelier, Boutroux and the neo-Kantian Renouvier, among others), where he graduated in 1872 before a commission presided by perhaps the most famous of all spiritualist thinkers, Félix Ravaisson. It was precisely this training that led him to move away from an exclusively scientific-experimental method based solely on the results of physiology and psychometry, preferring a descriptive type of psychology based on introspection and “inner sense” (Delbos 2010).

The son of a Hellenist, Émile Egger (1813-1885), and the maternal grandson of another well-known Hellenist, Félix Désiré Dehèque (1793-1870), Egger, like Ravaisson, was keenly familiar with ancient sources and Greek philosophy. During his academic career, which started in 1877, he taught at the Faculty of Letters in Bordeaux and in Nancy. He then won a position as a lecturer at the Sorbonne in 1893 – beating competitors such as Bergson and Lévy-Bruhl – where he went on to obtain a tenured position as Professor of Philosophy and Psychology in 1904. Over more than thirty years of university teaching, Egger taught courses in general philosophy, the history of Greek philosophy, modern French, German and English philosophy, general psychology, logic, ethics and morals, metaphysics, sociology, and Greek, Latin, French, German and English literature (Roni 2019: 16).

Egger is considered the first theorist of the “interior monologue”, anticipating Édouard Dujardin, whom James Joyce acknowledged as a direct source (Santone 1998). In his doctoral thesis, after providing an introductory historical reconstruction of the (to his mind undertheorised) phenomenon of inner speech from Plato to his contemporaries, Egger insists on the moral implications of interior language (Egger 1881: 5-6). The latter, in fact, “directs and prepares our relations with our peers” and corresponds to that “secret voice that constantly formulates our conceptions and judgements in the form of words” (6). What Wittgenstein would later call a “private language” (1953) represented, on Egger’s view, the instrument par excellence for accessing not only the dimension of consciousness and depth but also, in the passage from the monologuing ego to the dialogic we, intersubjectivity. The inner monologue is therefore not a withdrawal of consciousness into itself, according to the Augustinian *topos*, but, on the contrary, a social practice based on the virtual presence of the dialoguing interlocutors (Roni 2019: 17). Moreover, the intersubjective dialogical dimension is both explained and presupposed by the interior monologue, which is based on a processual structure that traces back to the earliest stages of child development, as Vygotsky would later clarify in his *Thought and Language*, re-

ferring to unspecified “French authors”, among whom Egger should certainly be included (2012: 238).

If we consider the intersubjective nature of Egger’s theory of the interior monologue in relation to the historical-political framework in which it was developed – that of Restoration France – it becomes clear that it concerns not only the representation of the self to oneself but also, essentially, the representation of the self to others. It thus involves a request for social recognition which, *ipso facto*, also assumes a political value. In other words, the intrinsically dialogical dimension of the interior word refers to a process of individual identity formation that, while it cannot be separated from the historical-social process of collective identity formation, also cannot be reduced to these processes. The autonomy of individual conscience is thus safeguarded, but at the same time conscience is necessarily connected to a spectrum of shared, liberal values, in accordance with the progressive Catholicism professed by the author (Roni 2019: 18-19).

Egger’s theory, and his philosophical reflections in general, rest on a practical conception of reflection that draws on classicism and opposes *otium* to *negotium*. The most obvious model for this is provided by Aristotle’s *theoria*, understood as an expression of the contemplative life and as superior to the active life. In other words, the interior monologue is the equivalent of a *sui generis* temporal dimension, whose medium is the peculiar duration of interiority – as opposed to the duration of social events, which are marked by the ticking of the clock and move at a speed comparable to the events depicted in film (Egger 1881: 113).

Even when Egger deals with the theme of habit, he tends to distinguish between the sphere of facts [*faits*] that are external to consciousness and that of facts that are internal to it. His reflections focus on the latter, introducing original elements that build on the premises provided by one of his masters, Albert Lemoine. Together with another of Lemoine’s pupils, Élie Rabier, he edited the posthumous edition of Lemoine’s *L’habitude et l’instinct* (1875), which brought together two of Lemoine’s texts, the first of which was devoted to habit and originally presented in the form of a memoir to the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques in Paris in 1869, published in a journal the following year (Lemoine 1870).

In *L’habitude et l’instinct*, Lemoine had made two main moves in relation to Ravaisson’s and Comte’s theories of habit: he had followed the former, against the latter, in limiting the phenomenon of habit to the organic world and denying its presence in the inorganic; and he had followed the latter, against the former, in reconciling habit with the theory of evolution. This limitation of habit to the sphere of the organic was based on the dynamic conception of habit that

Lemoine shared with Ravaisson. Following Aristotle, Ravaisson had conceived of habit as a disposition acquired through movement (2008). Since inorganic entities are indifferent to movement and lack a spontaneous impetus, for both Lemoine and Ravaisson they are incompatible with the acquisition of habits. Lemoine's openness to evolutionism is part of a similar perspective that is open to transformation and oriented towards reconciling spiritualistic elements and materialistic ones. According to Lemoine, there are certain habits that living creatures cannot acquire due to the conditions of their survival (e.g. animals with lungs cannot be habituated to living in airless environments). However, a given species can change over time, generation after generation, acquiring new habits that favour its development (Piazza 2015: 178-180).

Habit, for Lemoine, is therefore not fixed but variable and relative. Above all, however – and this is perhaps the most original theoretical core of his conception – it is habit that gives rise to repetition, not the other way around: “a first movement is enough to create the germ of a habit” (Lemoine 1875: 5). Thus, habit consists in the power of repetition rather than its result. Moreover, it does not so much correspond to a principle of action as to an ease that originates from an initial voluntary act. The will modifies the instinct and allows the body to learn a movement in a fluid manner that is consistent with its purpose. The moment the modification is learned, nature is modified. Contrary to Ravaisson, for Lemoine there are no habits of the will, since where there is habit there is no will. With that said, although we cannot speak of self-renouncement on the part of the will, we can speak of a “permissive will” in relation to habit – a will which is capable of taking control of the movement at any time, thus replacing habit (56).

2. *Habit and repetition*

Egger presents his philosophy of habit in the essay *La naissance des habitudes* [*The Birth of Habits*] of 1880, the English translation of which is provided here for the first time. Here, Egger takes up Lemoine's thesis that repetition is born of habit. If a single act is sufficient to produce a habit, the latter is endowed with a power that is presupposed by repetition, not *vice versa*. According to Lemoine, habit is born in a contraction of the past that anticipates the future, and from this point of view he is in line with the views of his famous teacher, Félix Ravaisson. He therefore seems also to be in line with Ravaisson, as well as Aristotle, who defined *héxis* as an acquired disposition that is a tendency or inclination (Rodrigo 2011).

There is, however, a fundamental difference between Lemoine and Aristotle. Habit, for Lemoine, is the “daughter of the first act”, whereas for Aristotle *héxis*

is the result of repetition and exercise, i.e. a process of habituation referred to by the term *éthos* (Lockwood 2013). Precisely for this reason, Egger claims that Lemoine corrected Aristotle on a fundamental point, showing that a single act is sufficient to determine a habit. As Léon Dumont also noted in his groundbreaking article *De l'habitude* (1876), however, Aristotle himself states in his treatise on *Memory and recollection* (1906) that in certain cases a single act is sufficient to create a *hêxis*: "When we reacquire the knowledge or perception or whatever it was, the acquired disposition [*hêxin*] of which we called memory, here and now we have recollection of any of these. [...] It so happens that some people become more accustomed [*éthisthênai*] from a single act than others in whom the sequence has frequently taken place, and hence, in some instances, after seeing the things once, we remember them better than others who have seen them frequently" (*De mem.* 2, 451b 2-6, 14-16; Eng. tr. 1906: 109-111).²

It is necessary to distinguish between the theory of *hêxeis* presented by Aristotle, above all in his moral works, and the decidedly less organic theory contained in his other works. According to the former, the acquisition of the moral virtues occurs through exercise and repetition, forming dispositions that are difficult to change once they have been acquired: this is the so-called theory of the unidirectionality of habits, which can guarantee a certain degree of freedom to the individual regarding the specific mode of his or her conduct, which is, moreover, unidirectionally conditioned by the possession of a certain moral *hêxis* (Chiaradonna, Farina 2020). This margin of freedom prevents us from concluding that the possession of a specific moral disposition necessarily produces certain courses of action. If this were the case, people would be transformed into automatons, and their actions into mechanical responses devoid of all ethical relevance. According to the theory set out in Aristotle's ethical works, exercise and repetition are also fundamental to the acquisition of other types of *hêxeis*: technical dispositions and practical skills (*Eth. Nic.* VI, 4, 1140a 10).

Something different can be found in other of Aristotle's works, however, in particular the treatise on *Memory and Recollection* (1906). Here, Aristotle suggests that a peculiarity emerges in the process of acquiring dispositions linked to perceptual data that can be circumscribed to a single impression. The distinction seems to pass between the world of action and that of the imagination. In other words, in order to act, I must have acquired certain skills and developed certain inclinations, whereas in order to fix an impression in my mind, which I will then be able to recall if necessary without effort, having stored it in my memory, I do not necessarily need exercise and repetition (Piazza 2021: 82-83). But this may apply to some individuals and not to others. What is nec-

² Translation slightly modified by the author.

essary is a certain natural predisposition to such a rapid acquisition, which is not a universal character but which seems to bear some similarity to the innate predispositions to certain moral virtues, which for Aristotle are not configured as virtuous dispositions precisely because they do not depend on our will and are not based on exercise, i.e. on a voluntarily exercised commitment (Morel 1997: 135).

Neither Lemoine nor Dumont is concerned with clarifying the question in relation to Aristotelian texts, since they intend to undercut the thesis, so successful for centuries, according to which habit is born from repetition. Egger, committing himself to defending the master's theory, introduces a variation that to some extent restores the Aristotelian doctrine. In fact, according to Egger, habit is to be traced back to the sphere of unconscious phenomena. Therefore, through the distinction between the sphere "of external actions" and the sphere "of purely internal facts", i.e. those acts or events that are not constitutively associated with muscular movements, he defines the field of validity of Lemoine's doctrine. In the former, a habit "very rarely" arises from a single act; in the latter, this happens much more frequently (*infra*, p. 257). According to Egger, a habit is "a power" or "a virtuality" which, according to its greater or lesser force, can manifest itself to consciousness through the corresponding action (*infra*, p. 256). In some cases, a single "fact" [*fait*], i.e. a single event, can determine in us "a tendency to its reproduction"; in other cases, this tendency is too weak to "produce a second act", at least "under the normal conditions of psychic life" (*infra, ibidem*). This is because the greater the attention given to the first act, the greater the likelihood of an "unconscious tendency" to repeat it, i.e. the habit itself (*infra*, p. 261).

Egger, like Lemoine and Dumont, does not mention the passage from Aristotle that would partly bring the latter closer to Lemoine. Yet some of his examples of "purely internal phenomena" suggest that he had knowledge of Aristotle's doctrine of memory and recollection. Indeed, Egger here refers to those repetitions that are "commonly called *facts of memory*", adding that "no one is surprised to remember for the first time what he has not seen or heard but once" (*infra*, p. 262). Among the facts of memory Egger includes not only "memories" but also "remembrances" (as well as "*idées fixes*", i.e. recollections that arise "too frequently", for which he also uses the term *habitudes*, here intended in a less technical meaning). Reminiscences are remarkable examples of the "power of the first act" (*infra, ibidem*). Egger derives an interesting theory from them, which would seem to be a gloss on both Aristotle and Ravaisson: "a being capable of habit is a being whose act has an effect on the power to act – or, in other words, on nature, – by disposing it to repeat it, i.e. by making determinate what was originally indeterminate in the same power" (*infra*, p. 263).

This is a perspective that would be revisited by Chevalier fifty years or so later, when, believing he could resolve the “question so often debated as to whether habit is formed by the first act or results from repetition”, he summarised what had been sustained by the long tradition to which Lemoine, Dumont and Egger had made a decisive contribution: “the assumption of an habituation [*accoutumance*], born of repetition, prepares or strengthens the habit [*habitude*], but the habit itself is formed at once and results from the first act” (Chevalier 1929: 208-209).

3. *The slip of the tongue [lapsus] as the first act*

Although Egger presents Lemoine’s thesis as a correction of Aristotle’s theory, he actually takes it as a starting point for developing his own argument. Veiledly reproaching his teacher for not having offered “precise cases” (*infra*, p. 257) to support the new theory, he rhetorically uses this failure to motivate his essay. According to Egger, in order to investigate the problem of habit, it is necessary to take into account certain concrete facts. Habit is a dual phenomenon, both psychic and physical. There are exclusively muscular habits, purely psychic habits – such as “knowing” and “remembering” (*infra*, p. 262) – and finally, habits of a psychic nature which also involve muscular activity. The latter have the specific merit of making something that belongs to the interior perceptible from the outside and therefore allow for a more precise analysis of the phenomenon of habit. From this point of view, Egger is perfectly in line with a positivist approach, but he is convinced of the usefulness of introspection (Bianco 2018). For this reason, he favours as examples those facts of habit that are experienced personally and that are easily recognisable in everyday behaviour.

The last part of the essay is devoted to the study of habit in relation to purely psychic events such as memory. In fact, Egger is convinced that such events provide countless examples of the power of the first act. However, Egger’s true originality lies in the type of example he uses to illustrate the birth of “mixed” habits – those that are both psychic and physical. Long before Freud, he undertook a particular case study of slips of the tongue [*lapsus*] – a phenomenon we have all experienced and which is closely related to habit. This choice was certainly well thought out, since such slips immediately draw attention to the sphere of the psychic and the unconscious. In fact, Freud himself (1995) claimed that lapses often occur in conjunction with the expression of preconscious thoughts. According to Egger, habit is “a tendency, a power, a virtuality” (*infra*, p. 256) which in itself remains hidden from our consciousness; it only reveals itself in the right conditions, and only through its own act. Habits arise precisely in this interstitial space, somewhere between the unconscious and the

conscious. In this context, what Egger calls “the property of the first act” (*infra*, p. 259) becomes fundamental. There are two types of slip, but only one corresponds to the birth of a new habit: “some consist in the substitution of one word for another and resemble a solecism; others consist in the introduction, into a correct sentence, of a word that is unknown to the language, that is to say, a true barbarism. When we say or when we write one word of our language in place of another, we repeat a word out of order instead of repeating the only word that, at that point in the discourse, would be appropriate: we follow one habit in place of another, and thus the spirit does not innovate. It innovates, on the contrary, when we replace the word required by the sense of the discourse with one devoid of sense, a barbarism” (*infra*, pp. 257-258).

The first kind of slip, which consists in the simple substitution of one word for another, does not produce anything new, since it simply replaces (by mistake) a linguistic habit that would have been appropriate in the context of the sentence. By contrast, the second kind of slip derives from the introduction of an unknown word into a sentence and therefore generates a new habit.

Egger draws a highly representative example of the latter from his own experience. One day, he was giving a lecture at the Lycée d’Angers, and his speech required him to repeat the words “habit” and “volition” several times. At a certain point, he happened to say “habition” by mistake. When he realised his mistake, he immediately corrected himself. Nevertheless, he found himself unwittingly repeating the invented term “habition” again (*infra*, p. 258).

With this example, Egger believes he provides clear proof of the “power of habit [...] which resides in a single act” (*infra, ibidem*). Indeed, the first appearance of barbarism [*habition*] already possesses the force necessary to generate a habit, without any repetition being required. On the contrary, repetition coincides with the result of the force of habit. It must be remembered, however, that the attention paid to the slip and the reflection that follows it contribute fundamentally to the formation of a genuine new habit. In fact, the less a slip is noticed, the more likely it is that the normal regime of habits will remain indifferent to this small deviation and thus remain unchanged. If, on the other hand, an act gets our attention, the possibility of its being reproduced increases considerably. Attention stimulates mental effort directed towards avoiding the repetition of the same mistake, but the effect is actually quite the opposite. As Egger writes: “It attracted our attention; we noticed it and then rejected it; we thereby imprudently elevated its importance, and when our attention left it, it left behind it a much stronger tendency than had we ignored it. Thus repetition was fostered by the mental effort which was intended to defend us from it” (*infra*, p. 259). The error one wishes to avoid becomes an object of reflection for the spirit, and the seed of habit contained within it has the opportunity to grow

and strengthen itself within one's consciousness, rightfully becoming part of a "web of facts of consciousness" (*infra*, p. 266), i.e. the normal interweaving of acquired habits.

By introducing the role of attention and reflection in habit, Egger engages in dialogue with a tradition launched almost eighty years earlier by Maine de Biran. As Roni (2019) points out, Egger's familiarity with Biran is documented not only in the quotations contained in his works but also in his own university lectures. This tradition generally states that habitual acts seem to require less effort, both physical and mental, than other acts. Such fluidity of action therefore coincides with a decrease in conscious attention. For Maine de Biran, for example, habitual acts become almost automatic, thus escaping the control of the will: "it is thus, therefore, and by cloaking our motor activity in the extreme facility of its products, that habit effaces the line of demarcation between voluntary and involuntary acts" (1929: 104).

However, it is important to remember that Egger's focus is not the characteristics of already-rooted habits but rather the ways in which new habits are established. From this point of view, the conception of the slip as the birth of a habit seems to follow those "anomalous products" (137) that Maine de Biran attributes to the spontaneous activity of the brain. According to Biran, regardless of any previous determination, the brain can in certain cases produce completely new images. These images often disappear as soon as the individual returns to his or her normal habits – an eventuality that Egger associates with the first type of slip, which corresponds to a simple linguistic substitution. In other cases, abnormal products of the brain can be transformed into new and persistent habits. Maine de Biran identifies three possible explanations for this, one of which is attention: "It seems, therefore, that if the spontaneous activity of the cerebral organ sometimes furnishes a sort of raw material for fantastic images, it is the continual preoccupation, the attention at first voluntary which the individual has been able to give them, it is particularly their association with external, familiar objects, which furnish them frequently with the opportunity of being reproduced" (139).

On the other hand, the importance of attention as a function of the reproduction of a certain impression, image or habit is not only found in the philosophical tradition preceding Egger but a central theme in the psychology of his time. We need only think of Taine, who, in his *De l'intelligence* (1870) (published only ten years before Egger's article), underscores the decisive influence that a certain degree of attention can have on the functioning of memory. In nineteenth-century France, memory was a field of investigation that was often almost indistinguishable from habit, and in this article Egger himself analyses the phenomenon of reminiscence in relation to habit. Thus, whether it is specifi-

cally about memory or more generally about habit, philosophy and psychology agree on this point. Both images and actions possess their own initial intensity, which makes their subsequent reproduction possible. Of all the events that populate the psyche, however, those that enjoy a greater degree of attention when they first occur are most likely to impose themselves on the others.

4. *The twentieth century: courses on habit at the Sorbonne*

Having published *The Birth of Habits* at the end of the century, Egger was the bearer of French reflection on habit, the roots of which lie in the thought of the *Idéologues*. In his short text, some of the main points of the nineteenth-century history of the concept emerge, even if only tangentially. He both makes explicit the debt that binds him to Lemoine and maintains more concealed resonances, however traceable, with other authors. It is enough to think of the distinction between the physical and the bodily, which, in the facts of habit, have a clearly Biranian flavour (Maine de Biran 1929), or of the use of the terms “tendency” and “inclination”, which, as we have seen, undoubtedly evoke the Ravaissonian definition of habit (Ravaisson 2008). Yet Egger’s short essay does not limit itself to bringing together elements of his predecessors’ theories. *The Birth of Habits* certainly has its own originality, likely due to Egger’s more modern conception of the conscious and the unconscious, which he uses to outline the birth of a new habit. For example, we know that Egger, who was interested in the problem of the division of states of consciousness, closely followed the well-known case of Félida. On this occasion, for example, he invited Étienne Azam, the young woman’s doctor, to observe a possible relationship between the acquired habits and the two different states of consciousness of the patient (Bizub 2006: 49).

After 1880, Egger continued to work on habit, although he did not dedicate any further publications to it. The results of the continuation of his work became the subject of a series of lectures at the Sorbonne; in particular, we have access to the transcripts of two university courses held by Egger in 1901 and 1905, which appeared in the *Revue hebdomadaire des cours et de conférences*.

In 1880, Egger had been concentrating on a specific aspect of the question, namely the nature of the movements that regulate the alternation of new and old habits. He had therefore postponed reflection on any further topics, such as the general characteristics of habit and its effects. More than twenty years later, Egger’s thought on habit had become much more refined and precise.

First, the Aristotelian-Ravaissonian influence, as it were, was much stronger than Lemoine’s. In the lectures of 1905, in fact, we read that habit is nothing more than the symbol of a possibility. The problem of repetition also becomes more specific: it is no longer a question of establishing the precedence of habit

vis-à-vis repetition but of understanding the relationship between them.

Habit is here defined as “a power of repetition” (Egger 1905: 512),³ which requires an occasion in order to become actual. The theme of the occasion, already present in the 1880 article (even if only incidentally), takes on a decisive importance. Egger now distinguishes between *conditions* and *occasions* of the occurrence of a habit (359-360). Occasions, closely linked to the associative process, are external but essential to the recurrence of a habitual act. Conditions, by contrast, refer to an internal logic: the condition of the habitual fact is habit itself, as the power of unconscious repetition rooted in the first act: “The first act and, subsequently, similar past acts leave behind them an unconscious power of repetition, which manifests itself only when it passes into the act, only when it does or contributes to doing a new but repeated act” (360).

In the lectures, there is also a precise division of habits into four categories: positive and negative, on the one hand, and general and special, on the other. None of this is found in the 1880 article, but the first pair of categories had already been developed by Egger in his only monograph, *La parole intérieure* (1881). This came about as a correction of Maine de Biran’s theory, which divided habits into passive and active. André Lalande also reports this in the *Habitude* entry of his famous *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* (1997), even if he expresses a certain perplexity. In fact, referring to Egger’s proposal, Lalande cautiously suggests that he makes his claims “perhaps wrongly” (395). Moreover, discussing Biran’s phrase “general habit”, Lalande underscores the extent to which “general” and “special” are not opposed for Biran, as they are for Egger (397).

According to the lectures of 1905, negative habits represent those acts that are carried out without attention and therefore without consciousness. Positive habits, on the other hand, are simply the same acts, although corrected by mental effort and attention.⁴ This does not mean that mental effort and attention must intervene fully; otherwise, it would be impossible to distinguish habitual acts from other acts that we perform with greater effort and commitment. It suffices for some initial effort to be retained in conjunction with the habitual act and for attention to accompany its performance. In this way, a negative habit is immediately transformed into a positive one, i.e. ultimately into a habit that allows one to maintain an unchanged degree of consciousness, despite the frequent repetition of the same act. Biran’s mistake, according to Egger, is believing that there are active faculties that are enhanced by habit and passive facul-

³ All quotations from Egger’s courses are translated by the author.

⁴ Egger previously (1881) argued that, in addition to mental effort and attention, imagination and experience may also be helpful in this regard.

ties that are weakened by habit (1905: 652). The distinction is played out only at the level of habits themselves, which can be of different kinds, positive or negative – a division that takes on a moral nuance, since it seems that every negative habit, if desired, can be transformed into a positive one. Egger's correction of Biran would have a ripple effect and was subsequently reported by Chevalier in his important text dedicated to habit (1929).

The second pair of categories is built around the idea of repetition. According to Egger, there are in fact two ways to repeat: one pure and simple, and another that brings with it something innovative. Special habits correspond to the first type and imply the exact repetition of an act which, no matter how many times it occurs, remains unchanged. General habits, on the other hand, involve variation and are therefore innovative. One example of this is slips of the tongue, which Egger had already dealt with extensively more than twenty years earlier. In order to understand Egger's conception of general habits, however, it is necessary to think of an artist's talent: "A painter has a certain kind of talent and manifests it in all his pictures: he does not repeat himself; nevertheless, he imitates his past pictures in his new ones. The new paintings are original in some parts, but not in all" (1905: 655).

With this comparison, Egger pushes his conception of the second kind of repetition to such an extreme that he separates this kind of habit from the very idea of repetition. In fact, the last lecture ends with the claim that "this general habit, which is confused with talent, is a principle of *innovation* and not of repetition" (655).

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