The Birth of Habits

Victor Egger

NOTE

This journal issue presents, for the first time in English, Victor Egger's short essay *La naissance des habitudes*, published in 1880 in the "Annales de la Faculté des Lettres de Bordeaux" (n. 1, pp. 209-223).

The translation is based on the original text, the page numbering of which is indicated in square brackets. In order to facilitate the reader's understanding of some of Egger's examples, in some cases the original French is provided in a footnote.

Egger's notes can be found at the foot of the page. Bibliographical additions and translators' notes are placed between square brackets.

The translation of the quotations included in the text is by the translators, unless otherwise indicated.

We warmly thank Carolyn Benson for the expertise with which she revised this translation.

philinq X, 2-2022, pp. 255-269
ISSN (print) 2281-8618-ETS doi: 10.4454/philinq.v10i2.431

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I

"They are by habit", Aristotle says, "all those [actions] which [men] perform by reason of having performed them many times".[1] This is likely only an incidental sentence in the *Rhetoric*, but Aristotle nowhere contradicts it and sometimes even seems to evoke it. His view of this fundamental law of psychic life can be summed up in the following definition: "Habit is a power which is formed little by little as a result of the frequent repetition of a phenomenon which was not originally natural, yet in the long run habit comes to simulate nature".[2]

At the beginning of *L'habitude et l'instinct*,[3] Albert Lemoine corrects Aristotle's theory of habit as follows: if habit results from the repetition of the same fact [*fait*], the repetition of the same fact results, in turn, from habit. Repetition therefore fortifies habit but does not generate it; on the contrary, repetition, from the beginning, needs habit in order to be explained. If the tenth act finds its *raison d'être* in the first nine, the ninth finds its *raison d'être* in the eight that preceded it; similarly, the third act is explained by the first two, and the second only by the first. If an act could not by itself establish the beginning of a habit, we would not be able to understand how this power could suddenly appear in one of the following acts; if the power does not belong to any one of these acts, nor even to the first, there is no explanation of the fact that it can make itself manifest to us in the series of acts. It must be admitted, then, that all acts create habit; the

[1] [Aristotle], *Rhetorica*, I, 10, 13, p. 1369, b6. It seems to us that the formula with which Albert Lemoine's *L'habitude et l'instinct* ([Paris], Germer-Baillière, 1875, p. 2) begins is a paraphrase of this short passage.

[2] Compare C. Waddington[-Kastus], *De la psychologie d'Aristote*, [Paris, Joubert, 1848], pp. 217 ff.; the entries for *ethos* and *hexis* in Bonitz's lexicon [H. Bonitz, *Index aristotelicus*, Berolini, G. Reimer, 1870, pp. 216-217, pp. 260-261]; the entry for *consuetudo* in Bussemaker and Heitz's lexicon (Didot collection) [J.F. Dübner, U.C. Bussemaker, E. Heitz, *Index nominum et rerum absolutissimus*, in Id. *Aristotelis Opera omnia. Graece et latine, cum indice nominum et rerum absolutissimo*, vol. V, Parisiis, Editor Ambrosio Firmin Didot, 1848-1878, 5 vols., p. 193].

[3] [A. Lemoine, *Op. cit.*, pp. 2-6.]

first initiates it, and the successive acts confirm it. There is repetition only from the second act, and since habit is the only reason for the second act, this means that habit is pre-existent with respect to repetition; it is the power of repetition even before being its result. Thanks to the initiation of habit, the first act was sufficient to produce the second, and it was habit, the daughter of the first act, that generated the first repetition by which it was subsequently confirmed.

This argument is irrefutable, and we can consider Albert Lemoine's correction to Aristotle's theory a definitive acquisition for the science of the soul. We observe, however, that if we stick to the facts, not all habits seem to begin with a single act; there are some whose appearance, if not birth, is strictly in accordance with Aristotle's description, as in the following example.

When I arrive in a new city, I encounter a figure to whom I am indifferent on ten different occasions: as soon as he disappears, I forget him, but over time he imprints himself on my memory, and one day, when I encounter someone whose features are somewhat similar, I am reminded of him. In this case, the act of remembering had been long prepared for by a series of ten identical visual sensations; the habit did not appear until the eleventh act, so it is probable that the first would not have been sufficient to provoke the appearance of a memory in consciousness. I may concede that the first act initiated the habit, but the tendency to reproduction which resulted from it was too weak to produce a second act by itself, at least under the normal conditions of psychic life.

In the same way, the schoolboy who learns a lesson (I borrow this example from Albert Lemoine) does not usually attempt to repeat it after a first reading but reads and re-reads it again before putting the forces of his memory to the test by putting down the book.[4] He knows from experience that repetition alone will dispose the powers of his mind sufficiently to pass on to the act which is the purpose of his efforts.

Habit is a tendency, a power, a virtuality [210], and only its act reveals it to us. Habit prepares the act and, when the occasion proves favourable, brings it to consciousness, remaining for its part unconscious. On the other hand, it remains completely unknown to us if, for one reason or another, it becomes sterile, impotent, unable to act, and we cannot suppose it to be "invisible and present" except by analogy. It is true that if such reasoning was ever legitimate, it is precisely in the case we are dealing with here. Let us take it for granted, then, that every first fact leaves behind it a tendency to its reproduction – a tendency which is faint but not non-existent – and that this tendency, as long as it is not too weak and the occasion is favourable, is sometimes sufficient to induce the reproduction of the primitive fact.

[4] [Cfr. *ivi*, pp. 6-7.]

II

Albert Lemoine nevertheless neglected to cite precise cases in support of his argument. These cases, where the power of the first act is unquestionably shown, are very rarely met with in the domain of external and muscular actions, the only one normally attributed to habit, but are much more frequent in the order of purely internal facts. It is, however, customary to distinguish between memory and habit, and we shall therefore provisionally respect this distinction.

In those human actions of psychic origin in which muscular activity plays a part, and which are observable from the outside through it, the facts of which we speak are exceptional for two reasons: first, because the adult man innovates very little in the acts that his fellow men must witness and, when he does innovate, it is done in spite of himself, by error, by distraction; secondly, because these errors, these slips of the tongue [*lapsus*] – if he makes any – are not usually reproduced, and thus established habits easily re-establish their empire. Sometimes, however, the tendency left by the slip succeeds in inserting an act into the web of habitual acts: in such a case, we witness the first manifestation and, so to speak, the birth of a new habit.

This habit is indeed like a monster that cannot live. And yet the slips made by children, barbarisms formed by analogy – such as *taked* (instead of *taken*), *they ared* (instead of *they were*)[5] – persist for some time because the child believes they are correct and intentionally repeats them; did not the analogical slips of the Gallo-Romans, our ancestors, which became habitual and repeated from mouth to mouth, perhaps dictate the law and contribute to the formation of the French language?[6] The repetition of a slip of the tongue is not an indifferent matter: it helps us to understand the evolution of languages. We are witnesses to a beginning that will not be followed, but this spectacle disposes our spirit to imagine the origin of certain phenomena to which a lazy consensus has ensured a centuries-long duration.

Not all slips are new words or unusual phrases. There are in fact two kinds: 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 dis-

[5] [In the French original text: "comme *prendu* (pour *pris*), *ils sontaient* (pour *ils étaient*)".]

[6] So also *rendu* [rendered], which is not derived from *redditus*, and *printanier* [spring-like], which is incorrectly derived from *printemps* [spring]. On these two types of barbarism and their relationship, see E. Egger [Victor's father], *Observations et Réflections sur le développement de l'intelligence et du langage chez les enfants*, pp. 65-67 and p. 77 [Paris, Picard, 1879] (2nd ed., 1880).

course, 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. Every barbarism is a neologism, but it is a useless and futile neologism, a grotesque work of the creative imagination. If the slip is later repeated, this is certainly not due to the vanity of the inventor, but rather out of habit. This is because the first slip has left in us, despite ourselves, a reproductive tendency. In the following examples, we shall see the power of habit at work, which resides in a single act.

A few years ago, I gave a lecture on habit at the Lycée d'Angers. In the introduction, the words *volition* and *habit* came up again and again, for I was intent upon [212] distinguishing facts of habit from voluntary facts, which had been spoken of previously. But there came a moment when the two terms in antithesis became confused: I wanted to say *habit* and, a moment later, *volition*, and yet I found myself saying *habition*. I corrected myself immediately, but a few sentences later, having to say *volition*, I said *habition* a second time. I corrected myself again, but when I got to the heart of my argument, I forgot the word volition altogether. According to my syllabus, at the end of the lecture I should have quoted Aristotle's definition and pointed out the ingenious correction made to it by Albert Lemoine: I did not need to look very far for an example of the power of the first act; it was enough to remind the students of the double slip that had made them grin. Unwittingly, I had given them a *practical lesson* in the middle of the theoretical lesson, and a few months later I was able to see that, thanks to this unforeseen incident, Albert Lemoine's thesis had been neither forgotten nor contested.

Around the same time, one of my colleagues recounted the following to me. In his course, when he would stop in the middle of a reading or explanation of an author to make some additional remark, he would routinely say: "Let's go! Let's continue", or simply: "Let's go!" When, on the other hand, he interrupted the pupil in charge of reading or explaining, he would say: "Go!", meaning "Continue!" One day, he realised that he had just said to a pupil: "Let's go! Go". The two habits had unpleasantly merged.[7] The teacher mentally scolded himself and promised not to do it again. But, at the next class, he repeated under the same circumstances: "Let's go! Go". New remorse, new good intentions, new

[7] [In the original French text: "Vers la même époque, voici ce que me racontait un de mes collègues. Dans sa classe, lorsqu'il s'était interrompu au milieu d'une lecture ou d'une explication d'auteur pour faire quelque remarque incidente, il disait habituellement: 'Allons! continuons', ou simplement: 'Allons'; quand au contraire il avait interrompu l'élève chargé de lire ou d'expliquer, il lui disait: 'Allez!', pour 'Continuez!'. Un jour, il s'aperçut qu'il venait de dire à un élève: 'Allons! Allez'; les deux habitudes s'étaient fâcheusement soudées".]

defeat; he had to give up the fight and resign himself to always using this locution, *invita Minerva*, as odious as it is ridiculous. When he was telling me this story, the holidays were approaching: he was hoping to recover through rest and oblivion. I do not know whether his hope was disappointed.

In the two cases just mentioned, the power of the first act is explained by the very description we have given of it. 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 [213] which was intended to defend us from it. We might also say that the consideration given to the slip is an immediate remembrance and like a second act which succeeds the first without interruption: this second act is deliberate, even if natural and more or less unreflective. Perhaps the third, which we actually call the second, results more from mental effort than from the first act; or at least the property of the first act does not appear free from all accessory influences. The same objection can be made with regard to infantile barbarisms: the child repeats them without intention, often even after reflection, because he believes he is speaking correctly and wants to be understood without difficulty.

What amply proves the influence of attention *a parte post* on the preceding examples is the fact that a slip that is immediately corrected, then repeated, then corrected again often becomes the almost necessary antecedent of the exact term which, for its part, invariably follows it. We correct the error we make out of habit: the error and the correction, at least for a certain moment, become inseparable. They form the two successive terms of one and the same habit, and of these two terms, one is involuntary, the other voluntary; yet they have the same fate, and the whole constitutes a new habit. The attention we pay to the slip is in some way materialised in the rectification; it as it were imprints it on us and at the same time, by the substitution of a correct term, cancels its effects on the intelligence of others. This phenomenon is very common; here is an example from my own experience:

When I took my first exam – the baccalaureate – the venerable Professor Patin, after having made me analyse a tragedy by Sophocles, invited me to speak about Virgil. Since I had just pronounced Orestes' name ten times, understandably a little nervous, I made Orestes the author of the *Eclogues*. I corrected myself; an instant later, the author of the *Georgics* was named: "Orestes – no! – Virgil", and then all of the books of the *Aeneid* paraded through my exposition as the works of a poet whom I admired very much and knew very well but whom I invariably called: "Orestes – no! – Virgil". It goes without saying that this singular habit did not survive the emotion that was its cause and justification. [214] The surest way to avoid a slip already committed is never to think about it again.

Nevertheless, if we do think about it despite ourselves, we must ensure that our attention, instead of following the risky term, immediately precedes it. To rage against one's oversight and correct it by making a resolution not to relapse is to increase the small chance it had of returning. One can protect oneself from error not in advance but only in the very moment: foresight can do nothing; only presence of mind is effective. Nevertheless, it is not enough to want it; one must also know precisely what one wants, because slips are insidious and can reappear in new forms. The following case is proof of this.

A few years ago, I was quickly sketching some notes while listening to a natural history lecture and had just written down the words *polyp*, *hydra*, *type*, when the word *time* came up. I spelled it the same way as the previous ones, with an *y*. I corrected the oversight; a little later I repeated it and then corrected it again. I then noticed that the error had already been repeated twice, and I resolved at this point to avoid it. But I was in a hurry to write: the word *time* came up for the third time, and I tried to be careful, but apparently it would take a lot more than that, since I made another mistake. I no longer wrote *tyme*, with a *y*, but *type*. What had happened? The two tendencies, the tendency to write the word *time* and the tendency to write the word *type*, had become confused, and I had wanted to separate them: by paying attention I had succeeded, but the mental effort had been too brief to retain a well-determined representation of its object, and, of the two distinct tendencies, the inappropriate one prevailed. Perhaps the mental effort was also undertaken too late: I had already written *ty* when I was taking care not to write *tyme*. The attention did not have a retroactive effect and served to avoid the barbarism only at the cost of another error. – For the sake of completeness I must add that, while I had noticed my error twice and had thought of avoiding it the third time, I had not, while writing, recognised the decisive cause. I had immediately forgotten the words *polyp*, *hydra* and even *type*, which I only took into consideration when I re-read my finished work. Therefore, no special attention to the word *type*, correctly used, had predisposed me to make the third slip: the new error was only caused by the acts of attention the aim of which [215] was to correct or avoid the first oversight.

When a slip is not perceived by its author, there is little chance of its recurrence; on the other hand, its repetition, when it does occur, reveals that a minimal tendency may be sufficient in some cases to produce a second act similar to the first. The property of the first act is then shown to be free from the auxiliary influence of mental effort. It is not attention that, by adding itself to the act, gives it the power to reproduce itself, for it already possessed this power on its own, since attention had ignored it. Attention likely increases the power of habit, and the stronger the habit, the more easily it reveals itself; but a very weak habit, born of a single act – and of an unreflective act, both before and after its

production – may still reveal itself, at least if it is given the opportunity without delay, immediately after its birth.

A lady was telling several people about a misfortune that had recently befallen one of her friends, and at the end of the story, looking dismayed, she exclaimed: "Ah! It's *no fher for un*" (instead of "It's no fun for her").[8] "But what are you saying?" her husband asked her. And the lady resumed, much astonished by the question: "I say it's no *fher for un*!" It was necessary to repeat the sentence, correcting it, before she realised her absentmindedness.

I regret that I do not have a second example to compare with the preceding one. This kind of occurrence is necessarily very rare, because it presupposes a very high degree of distraction or emotion; it is necessary that the mind, concentrating entirely on the idea or feeling that occupies it, should pay no attention to the words by which it expresses its inner states.

The repetition of the slip, if it is unnoticed, is more frequent in calculation operations: the comparison of different results reveals an error; we begin the dubious calculation again and make the same mistake again in the same place. I can see two reasons for this relative frequency. Firstly, the habits we follow when calculating are too similar to each other, and nearby tendencies are more easily confused. Moreover, as calculation is not the constant occupation [216] of most men, these habits are usually less deeply rooted than those which our speech obeys, and new habits easily creep in among old ones, which offer too little resistance to them.

Although I have been unable to offer any examples along the lines of the preceding ones, slips that are repeated after being noticed should suffice to illustrate Albert Lemoine's thesis. Attention, in fact, has no special power; if it predisposes phenomena to repetition, it is only because it increases the amount of consciousness that would have belonged to them in its absence; the unconscious tendency that prepares the return of the act to consciousness is proportional to the amount of consciousness that is attributed to the act at the time it occurred; attention increases our consciousness of an already conscious state: it is first nothing more than the coefficient of consciousness, and then by reflection also of habit. The tendency towards future consciousness always depends, in the last analysis, on past consciousness.

[8] [In the original French text: "'Ah! ce n'est pas *guelle pour ai!*' (au lieu de: gai pour elle)".]

III

In all the cases we have mentioned so far, the act was, at least in part, muscular. Let us now turn to purely internal phenomena, of which muscular actions may be signs but in which they do not enter as constituent elements.

In this order of facts, the examples of the power of the first act are innumerable: mental repetitions are commonly called *facts of memory*,[9] and no one is surprised to remember for the first time what he has not seen or heard but once. Common parlance rightly distinguishes between *knowing* and *remembering*: *knowing* denotes habits of mind that are established and enduring, and whose act is frequent because it has been frequent; *remembering*, on the other hand, is the act of a nascent habit, still uncertain of its future, and perhaps destined to die young, for many memories are ephemeral [217] and do not shine in our consciousness but once. We also observe that, in linguistic usage, the noun *remembrance* does not refer to mental habits that are too imperious and too intense: a recollection that arises too frequently is called an *idée fixe*, *mania*, *habit*, and not *remembrance*. Remembrance can be defined as follows: *a nascent mental habit, whose object is strictly determined and whose act is accompanied by a judgement of recognition*.

When the judgement of recognition fails, the repetition is called *reminiscence*. Reminiscences are remarkable examples of the power of the first act, for they are often remote reproductions of acts that have not been remembered in the meantime and which are brought back to consciousness by an extraordinary concourse of circumstances. The normal association of ideas sometimes provides the occasion for repetition, as in the famous example of Corneille, who,[10] without knowing it, borrows the verses of *Polyeucte* from Godeau:

> And just as it has the brilliance of glass
> It likewise has the fragility.[11]

Sometimes the immediate antecedents of the phenomenon do not explain its manifestation: these cases of anomalous recollection or *hypermnesia* are only encountered in sleep or delirium,[12] states always characterised by the distur-

[9] The distinction between habit and memory is not scientific in nature. In this division, we follow French language usage in an attempt to give them an explanation.

[10] [G.] Ménage (*Anti-Baillet* [*ou Critique du livre de M. Baillet, intitulé Jugemens des savans*], vol. II [La Haye, Foulque et Van Dole, 1688, 2 vol.], p. 207); Ménage learned of the case directly from Corneille himself.

[11] [P. Corneille, *Polyeuctes, Martyr*, translated by D. Johnston, "Chronicle" Office, Bath, 1876, p. 74.]

[12] Many noteworthy cases are narrated in detail in: [G.W.] Leibniz, *Nouveaux Essais* [*sur l'entendement humain*, in *Oeuvres philosophique latines et françoise de feu Mr. de Leibnitz*, Amsterdam-

bance of the ordinary functioning of habit.

We shall confine ourselves here to two examples of reminiscence. The first was reported to me by an eminent professor of one of our science faculties. He had written two lectures on the subject of popular astronomy two years apart, and when writing the second he could remember nothing of the first except that he had drafted it. Having found the first manuscript, he came up with the idea of comparing the two drafts: the plan was the same, the two introductions were identical except for a few words, and in what followed whole sentences were repeated without any changes. [218]

Of this fact, and perhaps of some others, we shall say that it is useless to invoke the power of the first act in order to give them an explanation: can the same mind placed in the same circumstances, faced with the same problem – the problem of invention or the problem of disclosure – solve it in two different ways? If it is true that an ingrained habit simulates nature, nature can likewise simulate habit; must we not then give to the nature of repetition alone the just credit we were previously tempted to attribute to habit? – This objection does not impress us. We are far from denying that nature has any part to play in this kind of fact, but it seems to us incontestable that nature is at least confirmed, and above all determined, by its act. 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 the act, i.e. by making determinate what was originally indeterminate in the same power. Twenty similar acts have a greater capacity to determine nature than one isolated act; but if one act can do nothing, how, if repeated twenty times, can it be more effective? We must either systematically deny habit and lead our activity in its entirety back to instinct or recognise the influence of habit in all our acts which are not new.

The second example is relevant because the repeated phrase, in the interval between the two appearances, passes from one language to another; the habit left by the first consciousness was thus not strictly determined but flexible and to some extent indifferent to the nature of the act.

One day, in Guernsey, Paul Stapfer met Victor Hugo on his usual walk. The poet approached him and said: "*Juvenal has stolen a verse from me*". I asked for an explanation, said Stapfer. Victor Hugo replied:

There is a whole volume of the *Châtiments* that has not yet seen the light of day; later, you will read the following:

Leipzig, Schreuder, 1765], I, 3, 18; [W.] Hamilton, *Leçons de métaphysique*, 18ème leçon [*Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*, vol. I, Boston, Gould and Lincoln, 1859-1860, 2 vol., pp. 235-252]; [L.F.A.] Maury, *Le Sommeil et les Rêves* [Paris, Didier, 1878, 4° ed.], [P.M.] Mervoyer, *Étude sur l'associations des idées*, [Paris, Durand, 1864], pp. 332-335.

No one knows his home better than I know the Champ de Mars.

Today, by chance, I opened a book by Juvenal and found:

Nota magis nulli domus est sua quam mihi lucus Martis.[13] [219]

Now, you must believe me, I have not read all of Juvenal's satires; there are some that I know by heart, but others I have never explored, and this is one of them.[14]

Unless we are to contend, with an English author, that Victor Hugo's soul formerly inhabited Juvenal's body after inhabiting the body of Aeschylus,[15] we must believe that the verse by Juvenal had been read by Hugo at the time of his first studies and that he then lost all memory of a presumably cursory reading of a copy he had not kept. There are even more extraordinary cases of forgetfulness: was not a learned polyglot one day surprised to recognise his own handwriting in the handwritten translation of an Oriental work he had found among the papers of a deceased friend? *He did not remember knowing this language.* He flicked through a dictionary, saw a grammar book: the forgotten language came back to him so quickly that he judged that he had known it and, without a doubt, he judged correctly.

The opposite of reminiscences are those cases in which we know we are remembering without knowing precisely what we are remembering. The memory, in other words, is incomplete and vague, but methodical reflection, if one is able to reflect, can complete and specify it, since it provokes favourable associations that bring to light the missing elements of the past fact of consciousness. If well conducted, reflection takes possession of the occasion, directs it, and seems to replace it as a stimulus to memory. Often, after a long period of oblivion, reflection revives the faint traces of a first act.

Horace Vernet, whose photographic memory was unbelievable, had a marvellous talent – one of his pupils told me – for compelling it to provide him at the right moment with the documents he needed: "he would leaf through it like a dictionary". One day, when he was directing the Academy in Rome, he had to paint a timpanist. The man and the horse were already on the canvas, but the artist's friends had, in vain, leafed through public and private collections for him: none contained a model of the instrument known as the timpani. Reduced to the sole resources of his memory, Horace Vernet put his head in his hands

[13] [In English: No one knows his own house as well as I know the groves of Mars; Juvenal, *The Satires*, I, vv. 7-8, in *Juvenal and Persius*, with an English translation by G.G. Ramsay, London and New York, W. Heinemann and G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1928, p. 3.]

[14] P. Stapfer, *Les Artistes juges et parties* [*Causeries parisiennes*], [Paris, Sandoz et Fischbacher], 1872, p. 77[-78]. [The verse attributed to Hugo is not, to our knowledge, to be found in any edition of *Les châtiments*, but only in Stapfer's text.]

[15] Ivi, p. 79.

and searched; [220] after twenty minutes, he picked up a pencil and without hesitation, without omitting a detail, drew a timpani, then took up his brushes and applied the colours. "You're making it up," an assistant said to him. – "I never make things up; it's all true" – "But where did you get the model from?" – "The Tower of London. I saw one there fifteen years ago".

Before concluding the discourse on memory, let us point out as evidence of the power of the first act what English psychologists have called an *inference from a particular to a particular.* A child has burned himself; he is again shown the object that made him suffer; the child moves his hand away. He does not yet believe that *fire burns*: the laws of nature are not yet formed in his mind, yet he remembers. This memory is like the stuttering of the inductive faculty; whether or not there is an *a priori* and universal principle of induction, there is no doubt that particular laws are created within us through accumulations of memories transformed into predictions. Renouvier quite rightly states the following in this regard:

> a first experience of a fact followed by another fact leaves behind, even in the most elementary consciousness, a disposition to imagine the second when the first reappears; this is properly speaking the infinitesimal element of habit.[16]

We have found that in children, memory manifests itself very early when it comes to frequently recurring facts and later when it comes to accidental facts, so much so that the child recognises his parents and nurse before he has even shown an aversion to the object that injured him.[17] – Although the child likely has many more memories than he knows how to express, it is probable that the habit is strengthened with age, for the first reproductive tendencies are weak, perhaps through lack of attention, and need to accumulate to produce an act that is really sensitive to consciousness. Yet in no period of life can the soul ever remain uninvolved in the influence of its acts: if habits arise from time to time, habit begins along with life, and the first sensation generates the first habit. [221]

[16] [C. Renouvier, *Examen des principes de psychologie de Herbert Spencer. V. Principes de logique*, in] "La Critique philosophique", [a. VI, n. 38], 18th October 1877, [pp. 180-188], p. 184.

[17] E. Egger, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

IV

At every age, moreover, habits similar to those of the new-born are formed in the soul – unknown habits, which never reveal themselves because they do not have the necessary strength to reproduce even one time the act that gave birth to them. This act was unreflective, unconscious, and the habit in turn is too weak. Moreover, since habits are maintained and enlivened by successive repetitions of the act, the sterile habit, already so fragile at its origin, never being revived by the act which it does not know how to produce, weakens with the passage of time: the older it is, the less able it is to manifest itself. With the exception of morbid cases, no occasion can make it manifest to us; it is the unripe germ of an impossible act, as if it did not exist.

At other times, the habit would have been forceful enough to produce an act, and if this second act had been an object of reflection for the mind, the tendency enlivened by attention would have been able to grow and last in time without fading, thanks to periodical actuations. However, if at first it lacks the opportunity, it languishes by waiting for it; when it finally arrives, it is too late. It is another tendency, either younger or stronger, that inserts its act into the web of facts of consciousness, and the unrealised act is condemned to unconsciousness forever. If habit is proportional to the act, or, in other words, to consciousness, it is also, but in an opposite sense, proportional to the duration of the intervals between the corresponding acts. The tendency, each time it occurs, increases; in inertia, on the other hand, it weakens. We could summarise this double influence of habit in a concise formula: *the measure of habit, at a certain moment, is given by the ratio, in the past, of the act and the non-act.*

The habits within us are incalculable in number: the more specifically distinct states of consciousness we have had, the more habits remain unknown beyond consciousness. At every moment of our existence, this whole crowd of habits tends to act and strive for consciousness, but each of them has a distinctly different chance of success. Some habits are impetuous, impatient, certain to reach consciousness and to do so often. The smallest opportunity is enough for them: they keep an eye out [222] for analogies, for associations. Their act has a thousand pretexts for entering the scene and, in the frequency of its returns, torments or bewitches us. Other habits, on the other hand, which are fragile and timid, do not know how to introduce their act into the series of facts of consciousness except thanks to a close analogy or a deep-rooted association; they show themselves only when an intimate companion leads them in by the hand. There are still others who are as if exhausted by a long rest, almost to the point of death, but reflection, if well directed, can discover them in the crowd in which they have hidden themselves and can bring them to light by force.

Finally, there are habits that are condemned, exhausted, and reflection, even the most ingenious, would not know how to find their traces and give them life.

Common sense, on the contrary, knows and calls by the name of habit nothing but the strongest tendencies, those whose act is periodical and easy, those which, vital enough from the beginning, favoured by the occasion and preserved by attention, can last as long as we do and accompany us to the grave. These in particular are part of our character; they serve to define us: behind the frequently repeated act, the witnesses of our life foretell the permanent tendency, and we as well, if we know how to put into practice the precept of Socrates, can know and quote them.

The triumph of these dominant habits is the work of a selection that is partly natural, partly artificial. The force of the first act and the frequency of the occasions is the part that belongs to nature – but attention, that is, the will, chooses from among the already conscious acts and arranges those it prefers for more frequent repetition. This hierarchy of our tendencies, delineated by the natural play of psychic facts and perfected by the will, constitutes a large part of the aesthetic and moral value of our soul. A frail soul is a soul cluttered by habits that are too many in number and too similar in nature; a strong soul, on the other hand, disdains most of the habits that are formed in it and allows them to disappear; it cultivates superior tendencies that are approved by reason and finds its pride in their triumph, which, in its eyes, is confused with the triumph of truth and goodness. [223]