

Condillac on the Acquisition of Cognitive Habits

Habits of cognition play a central role in early modern empiricist philosophy. Our ability to experience the world as regular and ordered is explained not by an innate faculty, nor primarily by the world itself, but rather by the acquisition of mental habits. In this paper, I argue that although scholarship on habits of cognition in the early modern period has almost exclusively focused on Hume's work, a more promising theory of habit was developed by his contemporary Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1714-1780). This theory is central to the development of Condillac's empiricist project and crucial for understanding why he was not simply a radical Lockean who developed an even more austere sensationalism. Instead of regarding habit acquisition as a process that follows from the mechanical association of sensory atoms, Condillac argued that even the ability to perceive sensory simples requires a process of habit formation that develops through a primitive pragmatic evaluation of the value-laden world. Despite its significance, Condillac's theory has not yet received a satisfactory analysis in the secondary literature. The *Stanford Encyclopedia* entry on Condillac does not use the word 'habit' even once. This paper, which aims to put this aright, develops in three stages.

(1) I briefly explain the understanding of habit developed by Locke and Hume and identify its weaknesses. Habits of cognition play a vital role in Hume's and Locke's theories of perception and their approaches to epistemology. Furthermore, they serve to make plausible a certain form of mental naturalism. Impressions are connected according to mechanical laws of association, and this process results in the production of dispositions that are triggered in definite ways in particular circumstances. Therefore, in terms of both the processes of acquisition and activation, habit, according to their model, highlights the passivity of the subject. If experiences e^1 , e^2 , and e^3 are experienced in succession by the subject, then the laws of association ensure that they will form mental

disposition d . Following this process, if the subject finds herself in situation s , then disposition d will be activated and a determinate mental event will follow. As Gilles Deleuze has put it, '[t]he mind is not a subject; it is subjected' (1991 [1953]: 31). When habits are understood in this way, the problem is that the choice is either to reduce human autonomy to the mechanisms of eighteenth-century natural science, or to account for it through an altogether distinct faculty.

(2) I argue that Condillac is able to avoid this dilemma by developing a theory of habit that draws its inspiration from the life sciences rather than from physics. His account is based on the fundamental claim that the behaviour of an individual organism is directed by its practical needs. Habits of cognition are acquired so that we are able to direct the body of the organism in order to maximise its ability to satisfy these needs. As a result of this reconceptualization of habit, Condillac emphasises not habit's *conservative*, but rather its *creative* nature. In other words, rather than focusing on how habit binds us to old routines, he shows that through the development of the right kind of habits an organism becomes increasingly adept at interacting with its environment. Habits are not restrictive of our freedom, but it is through their development that we become autonomous, rational, and reflective human beings.

(3) Condillac's theory of habit has not received the reception it deserves partly because it was hidden behind his own unhelpful technical lexicon. In order to remedy this, I unpack and clarify his theory by borrowing terminology from C.S. Peirce. Condillac's theory of habit anticipates many aspects of Peirce's account, and I suspect that the influence of this theory came indirectly through Lamarck. The benefits gained from this task go both ways. Peirce's terminology helps to illuminate the novelty and richness of Condillac's theory of habit, and Condillac provides a defence of an understanding of habit that is often taken for granted rather than argued for in the pragmatist tradition.