On Behaviour Change,
or the Potentiality of Habits

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Behaviour change

Prominent on:

✓ Political agenda – neo-liberalist paradox:
  ▪ Rescaling of responsibilities
  ▪ From command-and-control to ‘voluntary’ self-governance
  ▪ Logic of choice, attitudes, values, norms, etc.

✓ Intellectual agenda:
  ▪ Flourishing of behavioural psychology and behavioural economics – *Homo Psychologicus*
  ▪ In transport research emphasis on behavioural psychology and micro-economics
This paper

a) Reflects on the intellectual agenda with regard to passenger transport

b) Argues that scholars and practitioners should also embrace other ways of thinking about human action
Theory of planned behaviour

After: Ajzen (1991)
Defrosting habits

✓ Habit = more or less automatic behaviour acquired through repetition and reinforcement

✓ Often understood as preventing deliberation and change

✓ Strategies to break undesirable habits (= car use) and reinstitute deliberation:
  ▪ Change environmental cues
  ▪ Modify space-time distribution of benefits and costs
  ▪ Target people in disequilibrium – around life events

Example: temporary price promotion
Evaluation

Strengths:
+ Afford generalisation to population level
+ Enact multiple mental phenomena that can be targeted with specific instruments

Problems:
- Action-value gap
- Separation of body and mind, and privileging of the latter
- Sovereign, autonomous subject taken for granted
- Habit as mere repetition and automaticity
Thinking habit

Two traditions:
1) After Descartes/Kant

2) Inspired directly by Aristotle
   a) France, 19\textsuperscript{th}/20\textsuperscript{th} century: e.g. Ravaisson, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze
   b) USA, 1880-1930: Veblen, James, 

Habit as automatic behaviour inhibiting reflective thought

Habit as:
- Active tendency rather than behaviour
- Primordial way of being with complex relations with reflective thought
- More than automaticity and mechanism
Ravaisson (1838/2008)

- Habit’s dual logic – with each repetition:
  - A being’s ability to undergo change (= receptivity) diminishes
  - A being’s ability initiate change (= spontaneity) grows

- Held together by a developing ‘obscure activity’
  (≈ attunement of organs in some kind of equilibrium with environment) that anticipates and escapes consciousness and deliberation

- Key point: habit is also about creativity and subtle alteration from within
Dewey (1922)

Radicalises our understanding – habits:
- **are decentred**: incorporation of artefacts, others, etc.
- **can be** latent: they persist below the surface
- **are** social: emerge from pre-existing customs/institutions
  (≈ collectives of people, artefacts, infrastructures, ideas, and actions)
- **precede** reflective thought; reason emerges from conflicts between habits and customs

Key point: customs/institutions influence **habits** rather than behaviour, intentions, beliefs, etc.
Behaviour change

Bottom line: *not simply work against but also with habits*

Governing habits

a) Displace undesirable habits
b) Nourish desirable habits
c) Capitalise on endogenous spontaneity in undesirable habits
Displace undesirable habits

Dewey:

✓ Skeptical about interventions pivoting around information provision & attempts to reconfigure beliefs and values
✓ Change of “objective conditions” required

Integrated policy packages are required:

✓ Embed behaviour change in systemic change aiming for alternative socio-technical system
✓ Rather than opposing ‘hard’ & ‘soft’ measures, maximise synergies
Nourish desirable habits

Severely understudied and underemphasised

How:

☑ Constitute (latent) habits from young age onwards
☑ Turn low-carbon mobility into a technology of the self
  ⇒ piggy-back decarbonisation onto more immediate, personal benefits
Capitalise on endogenous spontaneity

✓ To be employed in circumstances where there is no realistic alternative for individualised vehicular travel
✓ Difficult to direct but try to create conditions conducive to spontaneity and creativity
✓ One possibility: focus on vehicle replacement & conventionalise electric vehicles:
  ▪ Avoid positioning them as novelty & hallmark of progress
  ▪ Make them easy, reliable and riskless in use
  ▪ Allow them to sink into background infrastructures of everyday life as quickly as possible
Final remarks

More becomes possible once habit is re-imagined

Behaviour change:

- requires more than *Homo Psychologicus* and neo-liberal logic of choice, attitudes, values, norms, etc.
- is more than the outcome of reflective thought after habits have been defrosted
- is first and foremost working *with* habits