

How can we change habits?¹

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[CC BY 4.0](#)Reflections by Vincent Colapietro²in dialogue with Winfried Nöth³edited by Guilherme Henrique de Oliveira Cestari⁴ and Levy Henrique
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W.N.: Good afternoon, we are here to speak about a very difficult topic: how to change habits. Peter Sloderdijk launched a book, translated into English as “You must change your life”.⁶ We were more respectful and put it in the form of a question: How do we change habits? But the presupposition of this question is the same, you cannot ask how you change a habit if you are not convinced that you must change habits, and life is habits, is it not? Well, of course, the background of our dialogue is Peirce’s conception of life and habits, but perhaps not only. We are here to meet and to speak in a series of online reflections. This is the third. A week from now we have a fourth. Without further ado, Professor Vincent Colapietro, whom you must know by now, is ready to speak about this topic, and we thank him very much for being with us once more.

¹ The dialogue took place online on the channel @TIDDigital youtu.be/It_Irwip2G8, on September 18, 2020.

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⁶ Peter Sloterdijk, *Du musst dein Leben ändern: über Anthropotechnik*, Frankfurt / Main: Suhrkamp, 2009. – English: *You must change your life: on anthropotechnics*, trad. Wieland Hoban, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

V.C.: Thank you so much for this opportunity. The title of the book to which you refer actually quotes a line from Rainer Maria Rilke, if I recall correctly.⁷ This implies that changing one's habits can extend all the way to changing one's life.

I want, however, to begin by talking about habit change in a very general way because it seems to me that the title of our exchange calls for that wider context. The *can* in our title points to the scope of our agency. *Can* we change our habits – does our agency extend to the alteration of our habits and, if so, how is this most effectively accomplished? The focus of our concern is really the *deliberate* alteration of habits. We, as agents, are oftentimes in some ways rather severely restricted by bad habits and, as a result, we want to change those habits. For example, somebody might want to quit smoking, or somebody might want to correct their posture. – I do not sit properly and this causes me backaches, so I have tried, with limited success, to alter my somatic dispositions. The focus on the deliberate alteration of habits is of course very important, but I want, at the outset, to step back from that specific topic and spend some time considering more generally the processes of habit change.

Habits are in fact changing all the time. Even when a habit remains the same, it is in some sense changing. I do not mean to be unduly paradoxical here. All I mean by this seeming paradox is that, when the exercise of a habit is fluid and unimpeded, what happens – in however imperceptible or slight a way – is that the habit is strengthened. In a sense, the habit does not remain the same. It is getting stronger, however imperceptibly. In general, then, habits are either strengthening or weakening. They are never staying absolutely the same, no matter how much it might look that way.

Two other points about habit change in general are especially pertinent here. First, habits often change willy-nilly; they just change because of the spontaneity of firstness, among other things. While habit change might result from deliberation, it mostly happens without intention or even consciousness. Habit change is an inescapable fact about the natural world. Deliberate alteration of habits is only a very small subset of habit change. Second, habit change need not be a function of repetition. Often it is, though not always. In fact, a single event might generate a deeply entrenched habit. Think here of a traumatic event, specifically, think about a very young child being attacked by a vicious dog. A single event,

⁷ The line is from Rilke's sonnet "Archaic Torso of Apollo", first published in 1908. Sloterdijk discusses the poem in the first chapter of his book. See also: Rachel Corbett, *You must change your life: the story of Rainer Maria Rilke and Auguste Rodin*, New York, NY: Norton, 2016.

the attack of the child by the dog, might cause the child to have a lifelong fear of dogs. This fear is at bottom a disposition to respond to certain animals, in certain ways. The child might be so traumatized that they are unconsciously and automatically fearful in the presence of *any* dog. In sum, habit change is inexorable, often unintended, and not always the result of repetition.

As we have just noted, the formation of a habit might be generated by a single event; a traumatic event would be an example of that. As we have also stressed, habits are always changing, even when they appear to remain the same. As important as outward or overt action as well as unanticipated and especially traumatic experience may be, they do not constitute the whole story about habit change. Dramatic imagination can play a critical role here (dramatic imagination being the capacity to imagine a scene –e.g., a dress accidentally catching on fire – and then envisaging various responses to a dramatic situation). There is a very interesting anecdote that Peirce recalls⁸ (one I quote it at the beginning of chapter five in my book on *Peirce's Approach to the Self*).⁹ It is an episode that is an actual recollection of his childhood, which involves his younger brother, who was very young at the time.¹⁰ I am not sure how old Herbert was at the time, though I would say he was probably six, seven, or eight. Peirce's brother Herbert,¹¹ who went on to become a diplomat and was for part of his career a United States ambassador in Oslo (at the time, Christiania). Peirce's household was the center of not merely the scientific community, but the literary in the cultural community as well. It was one of the most important gathering places in Cambridge, Massachusetts. While Peirce was a youth, one of the guests who used to come to Peirce's household was the American poet and professor at Harvard, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.¹² On July 11, 1861, Longfellow's wife Fanny had been the victim of a domestic fire accident from which she actually died as a result of her injuries. The accident had been a well-known and much discussed event

8 Charles S. Peirce. *Collected Papers*, vols. 1-6, ed. Hartshorne, Charles & Paul Weiss, vols. 7-8, ed. Arthur W. Burks, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1931-58 (in the following: quoted as CP, followed by volume and paragraph number), here CP 5.487, "A survey of pragmatism", c.1907.

9 Vincent Colapietro. *Peirce e a abordagem do self: uma perspectiva semiótica sobre a subjetividade humana*. Newton Milanze, trad. São Paulo: Intermeios, 2014, p. 151.

10 Peirce comments on this episode in "Reason's Rules" of c.1902 (CP 5.538).

11 Herbert Henry Davis Peirce (1849-1916).

12 1807-1882.

in the Peirce family.¹³ Some time later, there was a dinner party at Peirce's household. And low and behold, Peirce's mother, having spilled some burning spirits on her skirt also caught on fire. Brother Herbert, picking up a rug, moved immediately to the rescue, as though he had been practicing this action, and he did it with tremendous speed and accuracy.¹⁴ Afterwards, Charles asked Herbert about his immediate and deft response. The child in effect replied, "Well, you know, I heard the story and I had practiced in my imagination what I would do were such an event to occur in my presence."

The point is that dramatic rehearsal of an action, in imagination, merely in imagination, can be the basis for the formation of a habit. So, when the event took place at Peirce's dinner table and the dress caught on fire, Herbert's disposition was to respond immediately, as though he had physically, outwardly, practiced saving a woman from such a disaster. What he really had done was to rehearse this scenario in his imagination. "It was," as Charles later claimed, "a striking example of a real habit produced by exercises in the imagination". What enabled Herbert to respond so quickly and aptly was that "he had often run over in imagination all the details of what ought to be done in such an emergency".¹⁵ In its most rudimentary sense, this is a description of deliberation (to turn over in imagination what one ought to do, what line of conduct would be most fitting in such and such a situation).

¹³ For the report on the accident in the *New York Times* of July 12, 1861, see the reprint in the NYT archives at [nytimes.com/1861/07/12/archives/the-death-of-mrs-longfellow.html](https://www.nytimes.com/1861/07/12/archives/the-death-of-mrs-longfellow.html); accessed March 10, 2021.

¹⁴ Peirce's *Collected Papers* have two references to this episode. In "Reason's Rules", c.1902 (CP 5.538), Peirce writes: "I remember that one day at my father's table, my mother spilled some burning spirits on her skirt. Instantly, before the rest of us had had time to think what to do, my brother, Herbert, who was a small boy, had snatched up the rug and smothered the fire. We were astonished at his promptitude, which, as he grew up, proved to be characteristic. I asked him how he came to think of it so quickly. He said, 'I had considered on a previous day what I would do in case such an accident should occur.'" – Five years later, the reference is to "a lady" (in a footnote to CP 5.487, "Survey of Pragmaticism", c.1907): "I well remember when I was a boy, and my brother Herbert, now our minister at Christiania, was scarce more than a child, one day, as the whole family were at table, some spirit from a "blazer," or "chafing-dish," dropped on the muslin dress of one of the ladies and was kindled; and how instantaneously he jumped up, and did the right thing, and how skillfully each motion was adapted to the purpose. I asked him afterward about it; and he told me that since Mrs. Longfellow's death, it was that he had often run over in imagination all the details of what ought to be done in such an emergency. It was a striking example of a real habit produced by exercises in the imagination."

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

This brings me, I think, in some sense, to the heart of the story. For Peirce, human rationality is, first and foremost, *deliberative* rationality and, in turn, deliberative rationality involves is the dramatic imagination exercised for the sake of norms and ideals, logical, moral, and otherwise. What makes us rational or reasonable is our capacity to deliberate, to think through alternative lines of conduct. Although the expression is John Dewey's,¹⁶ there is almost exactly the same expression in one of Peirce's unpublished manuscripts, and it is an expression used to define, or at least characterize, what "deliberation" is.¹⁷ Deliberation is the dramatic rehearsal in imagination of various scenarios: you imagine you are going to do this, you imagine that you are going to that, and you try to, as best you can, think about the consequences.¹⁸ If you do this, what consequences follow; if you do that, what consequences follow.

In sports today, and especially in sports psychology, there is this process called "imaging". Before a game, players will prepare for it, oftentimes by imaging it.¹⁹ For instance, they will be imagining their opponents' particular tendencies and, in light of imagining, rehearse in their imagination what their opponent is going to do and, in turn, what they are going to do in response. So, what Peirce saw in the case of his brother is actually part of common sense, as it is also very widespread in contemporary sports.

16 John Dewey, *Human nature and conduct*, New York, NY: Modern Library, 1922, p. 190: "Deliberation is a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing possible lines of action. It starts from the blocking of efficient overt action, due to that conflict of prior habit and newly released impulse to which reference has been made. Then each habit, each impulse, involved in the temporary suspense of overt action takes its turn in being tried out. Deliberation is an experiment in finding out what the various lines of possible action are really like."

17 In his *Peirce e a abordagem do self* (see fn. 4), p. 84, Colapietro quotes from Peirce's manuscript MS 649 of April 11, 1910 (p. 26): "When I speak of a man's Real Self, or True Nature, by which I mean the Very Springs of Action in him, which means how he would *act*, not when in haste, but after 'due consideration', I mean such deliberation as shall give him time to develop."

18 To illustrate how we rehearse in imagination the scenario of something that we expect to occur Peirce gives the example of what we expect to happen when we use a vending machine: "Suppose for example that I slip a cent into a slot, and expect on pulling a knob to see a little cake of chocolate appear. My expectation consists in, or at least involves, such a habit that when I think of pulling the knob, I imagine I see a chocolate coming into view. When the perceptual chocolate comes into view, my imagination of it is a feeling of such a nature that the percept can be compared with it as to size, shape, the nature of the wrapper, the color, taste, flavor, hardness and grain of what is within" ("Minute Logic", CP 2.148, c.1902).

19 Cf., e.g., Sandra Moritz et al., "What are confident athletes imaging?: an examination of image content", *The Sport Psychologist*, v. 10, n. 3, p. 171-179, 1996.

We can think about this process in a social context. For example, we are going to a meeting and there is going to be, at the gathering, a particular person who completely drives us crazy. We know that she is over-officious, rather self-important and causes us to lose our temper. So, animated by our commitment to self-control and civility, we prepare ourselves for this person in order not to lose our temper. At its heart, then, rationality is an exercise of self-control that takes the form of a dramatic rehearsal in imagination, where we try out different lines of conduct and see what ensues from those lines of conduct.²⁰ Peirce is quite explicit about the intrinsic link between human rationality (or intelligence) and imagination: “The whole business of ratiocination, and all that makes us intellectual beings, is performed in imagination”.²¹

We are finally in a position to address squarely our titular question, “Can we change our habits?”²² This question might be translated into: How can we change our habits deliberately, that is, imaginatively? And this question invites another: Is habit change always goal-directed? There is always some goal, or ideal, governing the process of deliberation. For example, we are animated by the ideal of not losing our temper, not becoming angry, and not becoming one’s worst self. You deliberate about what this person is going to do in this meeting, and you do so in light of the ideal of emotional self-control. You, as an athlete, are preparing against your opponent, and you know that this opponent has certain tendencies. He extremely quickly shows you the ball and takes it away. If you go for the ball, he is going to go by you. So, you imagine the move, one of his signature moves, that he puts the ball out, just close enough he baits you, he seduces you into going for it, and then he goes around you, and you deliberate your image, and say, “Do not take the fake”. He puts the ball out, and you keep your position, you do not go for it.

20 See Vincent Colapietro, “Peirce’s guess at the riddle of rationality: Deliberative rationality as the personal locus of human practice”, in *Classical American pragmatism: Its contemporary vitality*, ed. Sandra B. Rosenthal, Carl R. Hausman, and Douglas R. Anderson, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1999, p. 15-30.

21 “Grand Logic”, 1893, CP 6.286. See also “Lessons from the History of Science”, c.1896, CP 1.46-48.

22 “Among the things which the reader, as a rational person,” Peirce stresses in “What Pragmatism Is” (1905), “does not doubt, is that he not merely has habits, but also can exert a measure of self-control over future actions; which means, however, not that he can impart to them any arbitrarily assignable character, but, on the contrary that a process of self-preparation will tend to impart to action (when the occasion for it shall arise, one fixed [or recognizable] character” (EP 2, 337). “Now the theory of Pragmatism was originally based,” Peirce claims in “Issues of Pragmatism” (1905), “upon a study of that experience of the phenomena of self-control which is common to all grown men and women” (EP 2, 348).

Each one of these examples is predicated on the self-controlled agent governed by a certain ideal and also relying upon the capacity of imagination to help that agent dramatically anticipate consequences – for the sake of realizing that ideal. To repeat: How can we change our habits? Not easily, certainly not directly. Agents cannot in the present immediately and instantaneously instill within themselves any given habit. On this point, Peirce is very close to Aristotle. There are at least three great philosophers – there are more than three theorists of habit since there are psychologists, anthropologists, and all kinds of folks who have written very insightfully about habits –, but there are at least three of the greatest *philosophers* who have made habit really quite central to their concern. They are Hegel, and Peirce. Aristotle, even more than Peirce, supposes that we have extremely limited control over our habits. Peirce stresses how limited our control over our habits is,²³ and how it is difficult to change habits.²⁴ Aristotle uses a rather remarkable metaphor here, he says the formation of a habit is originally in our power, but once the habit becomes deeply rooted in the character of the agent, that habit is almost, virtually, outside of our control. Aristotle uses the metaphor of throwing a stone. Once the stone is out of your hand, you cannot influence its course any more. The stone in flight cannot be trained to “behave” otherwise. The actions that generate human habits, by contrast, are in your control, but once the habit is formed, Aristotle says, you have little or no control over them anymore.²⁵

23 Cf., for example, Peirce’s claim that “most men are incapable of strong control over their minds. Their thoughts are such as instinct, habit, association suggest, mainly” (“Telepathy and Perception”, CP 7.606, 1891).

24 In his paper “The Fixation of Belief”, Peirce criticizes the incapacity of some contemporaries to change their habits (of belief) as their adherence to the method of tenacity: “A man may go through life, systematically keeping out of view all that might cause a change in his opinions. [...] But this method of fixing belief, which may be called the method of tenacity, will be unable to hold its ground in practice. The social impulse is against it. [...] Unless we make ourselves hermits, we shall necessarily influence each other’s opinions; so that the problem becomes how to fix belief, not in the individual merely, but in the community” (CP 5.377-78, 1877).

25 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103a (H. Rackham, trad.): “Moral or ethical virtue is the product of habit (ethos), and has indeed derived its name, with a slight variation of form, from that word. And therefore it is clear that none of the moral virtues formed is engendered in us by nature, for no natural property can be altered by habit. For instance, it is the nature of a stone to move downwards, and it cannot be trained to move upwards, even though you should try to train it to do so by throwing it up into the air ten thousand times; nor can fire be trained to move downwards, nor can anything else that naturally behaves in one way be trained into a habit of behaving in another way.” Available at: perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0054%3Abekker+page%3D1103a; accessed March 10, 2021.

The argument sounds a little fatalistic, which does not do justice to other ideas of Aristotle's, with which Peirce was more in sympathy.²⁶ But the point is merely how severely limited habit change is as well as how our capacity to alter our habits is likely quite small. This is most evident when we are dealing with bad habits: smoking or various kinds of habits we want to abandon. It is extremely hard to do so. Peirce is deeply appreciative of this topic. Habit change is indeed possible, but it requires the sustained exercise of deliberative imagination, animated by some transformative ideal. An old dog *can* learn new tricks, but only by becoming in some respect a young pup! As far as learning goes, the necessity of becoming childlike cannot be stressed too much.²⁷

W.N.: May I ask a question at this point? When you raise the question whether or how *we* can change habits, you consider agents who do or do not change their habits in a self-controlled way. Habit change of this kind belongs to the domain of thirdness, of agency guided by reason. However, in face of the present pandemic, we are all confronted with habit change imposed on us from circumstances beyond our self-control. So, should not the role of secondness, of habit change beyond our self-control be considered, too, of interruptions of habits by others, by external circumstances or even catastrophic events?

V.C.: You raise a very important point. While nominalists are in danger of eliminating thirdness altogether, Peirce and those inspired by him are sometimes at risk of exaggerating the role of thirdness. Here as everywhere else, we have to bring in secondness as well as firstness. Of course, we need to bring in all three of the categories, but for the moment, let us just limit our attention to firstness and secondness. Because I think that what happens in the cases to which you are so insightfully calling our attention is a combination between rupture and spontaneity. So, I am trying to make this computer work, and I am increasingly experiencing pure secondness. An incomprehensible opposition is thwarting my brute exertions. This thing, whatever I am doing, is not working. I am in effect bumping up against the wall. What happens, it seems to me in such ca-

²⁶ For some other respects in which Aristotle's philosophy is relevant to Peirce, see Philip H. Hwang, "Peirce and Aristotle on chance", in E. C. Moore (ed.), *Peirce and the Philosophy of Science*, Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1993, p. 262-75. Or: Demetra Sfendoni-Mentzou, "C. S. Peirce and Aristotle on time", *Cognitio: revista de filosofia*, São Paulo, v. 9, n. 2, p. 261-280, 2008. Or: Jorge Alejandro Flórez, "Peirce's commentaries on Aristotle's accounts of induction", *Discusiones Filosóficas*, v. 31, no. 2, p. 41-57, 2017.

²⁷ In a famous passage from Matthew, "unless you change and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (18:3).

ses, is that we become – at least *I* become – very quickly and intensely frustrated, and I do not have the presence of mind to conceive the full array or a wider spectrum of possibilities. We (at least some of us) keep doing the same thing and getting the same results, which is almost a definition of craziness or madness. I think what happens, in the best cases, is that there is the rupture, there is the arrest of a habit. That opens space for spontaneity, and we try this, we try that; the rupture, the arrest of the habit can, optimally – does not always, does not necessarily, perhaps does not typically, but it can – open up spaces of experimentation, of possibilities we did not previously imagine or anticipate.

I think that the exercise of habit, when it leads to an impasse – when we become stuck or blocked, so that we do not know how to go on, – can be a frustrating experience, just that and nothing more. But such an experience can also be the beginning of learning. And learning involves the explosion of a greater degree of spontaneity than was previously available to us. Let me draw a parallel here. When Peirce is talking about evolution, he, of course, thinks there are three different types or forms of evolution.²⁸ He thinks that Charles Darwin only captures one dimension of evolution. Chance variation and radical spontaneity, which were in the focus of Charles Darwin, offer only a partial explanation of the evolutionary process. In some sense, Darwin also focused upon struggle and conflict, but even so, this is not the whole of it. Those aspects of evolution run parallel to the processes of changing habits. The agonistic dimension of conflict, also the spontaneous dimension of chance, are all part of the process.

W.N.: Evolution by chance and spontaneity implies habit change under the influence of firstness, while evolution by struggle and conflict means habit change under the influence of secondness. But how about evolution and habit change under the influence of thirdness? Isn't it important in evolution, too?²⁹

²⁸ For Peirce's philosophy of evolution, see his 1893 essay "Evolutionary Love" in *The Monist*, vol. 3, pp. 176-200 (also in: CP 6.287-317) and Carl R. Hausman, *Charles S. Peirce's Evolutionary Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. And: Brioschi, Maria Regina, "Does continuity allow for emergence? An emergentist reading of peirce's evolutionary thought", *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2019. Available at: journals.openedition.org/ejpap/1647; accessed March 10, 2021.

²⁹ Peirce introduces his theory of the three types of evolution in his paper "Evolutionary Love" of 1893 (CP 6.302-303): "Three modes of evolution have thus been brought before us: evolution by fortuitous variation, evolution by mechanical necessity, and evolution by creative love. We may term them tychastic evolution, or tychasm, anancastic evolution, or anancasm, and agapastic evolution, or agapasm. The doctrines which represent these as severally of principal importance we may term tychasticism, anancasticism, and agapasticism. On the other hand the mere propositions that absolute chance, mechanical necessity, and the law of love are severally operative in the cosmos may receive the names of tychism, anancism, and agapism.

V.C.: I do of course think the influence of thirdness is extremely important. It ultimately culminates in *agapistic* evolution, potentially radical change through creative love.

W.N.: So, could you say a word about this third kind of evolution?

V.C.: Peirce does not write extensively on this topic, which is unfortunate because when he does write on this topic, it is deeply insightful.³⁰ What is crucial is that he is talking about a process of ongoing transformation, more precisely, a more or less radical self-transformation, wherein the self, in relationship to others, is being transformed in a rather dramatic, open-ended manner, and the way in which such self-transformation works is, in part, because of *agápē*.³¹ Now, *agápē* means that I care for the other as though the other were myself. He is not, Peirce is clear though subtle, engaged in an act of in self-abnegation or self-annihilation. The realization of the other and the realization of myself are, in some complicated not altogether obvious way, connected. This is a process of self-alteration, of self-overcoming, in which the dialectic, or the relationship of self and other, is at the center. It is precisely my ability to immerse myself in the other which enables me to grow. So, you, Winfried, as a linguist, transform yourself by immersing yourself in the study of this language and that language: it is precisely by your deep devotion to understanding this thing, which is not yours when you first come to it; it is quite foreign. When you are studying a foreign language, it is quite foreign. But it is precisely your immersion in that, which is other than you, that causes you to become transformed, and it goes for all of the disciplines. That really is an instance of *agápē*, solicitude for the other, for the other's sake, but not in such a way as to involve a negation of one's self.

W.N.: I have two questions, and they are very different. You returned to the self several times, so my question in this context is: "Is the self a habit?" The second question is: Peirce has an almost paradoxical expression, "the habit of habit change"³². What does it mean? Do you have a clue on how we can overcome our perplexity at these two questions?

30 For example, CP 1.107 (1896) and 1.348 (1903).

31 Peirce's use of the concept of *agápē* is inspired by its biblical sense of 'unconditional love' and as an argument against the 19th century doctrine of evolution by the Spencerian principle of "survival of the fittest": "The gospel of Christ says that progress comes from every individual merging his individuality in sympathy with his neighbors. On the other side, the conviction of the nineteenth century is that progress takes place by virtue of every individual's striving for himself with all his might and trampling his neighbor under foot whenever he gets a chance to do so. This may accurately be called the Gospel of Greed" ("Evolutionary Love", CP 6.294, 1893).

32 Cf. Winfried Nöth. "Habits, habit change, and the habit of habit change according to Peirce". In Donna E. West; Myrdene Anderson (eds.), *Consensus on Peirce's concept of habit*, New York, NY: Springer, 2016, pp. 35-63.

V.C.: Well, I do not know that I can answer these questions, but I certainly think that I can make several steps towards addressing them. I would hesitate to say without qualification that the self is a habit. While the self is inconceivable apart from habits, it is not immediately or univocally identifiable as a habit. I would say the self is an incredibly complex network of virtually countless habits, which are more or less integrated. On my account (and I take this to be essentially a Peirce account), the self is not a habit, but *a network of habits*. It is never a fully integrated (or harmonious) system or network; it is rather a *more or less* integrated system or network of habits. Peirce uses the expression – it is commonplace in the 19th century³³ – that a human being is a “bundle of habits”³⁴, and that is important, but what it misses, of course, is the extent to which a person or a self is a unified or integrated bundle of habits. We are not just some random collection; we are not just some completely chaotic number of disparate tendencies and dispositions. We are, to repeat, more or less integrated. Now, what about us, grounds or ensures, at least in a minimal way, the integration of our habits? I do not want this to be construed as a dualism, but there are distinct levels of functional unity. Simply as an organism, there is by virtue of physiology – thus of metabolism – a unified being. In order to have the functional unity of a living organism, the habits of my being are more or less integrated, and if they are going off, in all kinds of completely different directions, I will not survive, I could not live as such an organism. Indeed, I could not *be* an organism were my metabolic functions not knit together into a functional unit.

Thus, it seems to me, at least, that we have, at the biological or the organic level, a more or less integrated functional unity of habits. Rather early, the human organism acquires self-consciousness and various reflexive capacities. Self-consciousness is obviously a reflexive capacity, but self-consciousness provides the basis for self-criticism. I am aware of myself doing this, and I am critical of myself doing that. Self-criticism is not idle or purposeless, or it need not be idle or purposeless. It might have a point and purpose, and that point or purpose might be self-control. I take this triad to be extremely important, so the human organism, as a social actor, acquires certain dispositions, that cluster around these three capacities: the capacity for self-consciousness, the capacity for self-criticism,

³³ William James, in the first sentence of chapter 4 of his *Principles of Psychology* of 1890, writes: “When we look at living creatures from an outward point of view, one of the first things that strike us is that they are bundles of habits.”

³⁴ “Each personality is based upon a ‘bundle of habits’, as the saying is that a man is a bundle of habits. But a bundle of habits would not have the unity of self-consciousness. That unity must be given as a centre for the habits” (“Notes for Eight Lectures”, CP 6.228, 1898).

and the capacity for self-control. The capacity for self-control ultimately makes reference to some ideal. It could be a religious ideal, it could be a scientific ideal, it could be a moral ideal, could be a purely cultural ideal. This ideal allows me to integrate my habits more fully and finely than they would be in purely random biology.

So, to your first question, the self is not a habit, but a more or less integrated network of habits, as a purely biological being, that is one thing on the basis of the functional unity of the living organism. However, we become self-conscious, self-critical, and self-controlling agents and we do so in light of certain ideals, to which we devote ourselves. Without any entailment of dualism, then, the functional unity of reflexive agents depends on, but goes beyond the metabolic unity of the living organism.

W.N.: The second question was very different, the paradox of the habit of habit change. Is it missing to some people, who do not see the dangers of the future ahead?

V.C.: Yes, I do think so. I have been reading a fair amount of Albert Einstein.³⁵ I am teaching this semester, and Einstein has some wonderful short essays, pedagogically effective texts. One of the things he stresses in these essays is the need to maintain or rekindle our childlike wonder. Einstein was not a very good student, as a matter of fact; more bluntly, he was a somewhat bad student, in certain respects. That caused him to reflect upon education, in a really deeply thoughtful way. And one of the things that he keeps on stressing in these writings, especially in education, is that this childlike wonder is really crucial for the human animal, for the human learner.³⁶ One of the tragedies, and Sigmund Freud says this too, is how early and seemingly irreparably the childlike wonder of human-animal gets extinguished, or gets maimed.³⁷ The most delightful and successful people, it seems to me, have ways of renewing and rekindling their childlike wonder.

35 1879-1955.

36 Albert Einstein, *Ideas and opinions*, ed. Carl Seelig and Sonja Bargmann, New York, NY: Crown, 1954, contains several essays (p. 54-67) specifically dedicated to education. On p. 63, Einstein writes: "The point is to develop the childlike inclination for play and the childlike desire for recognition and to guide the child over to important fields for society; it is that education which in the main is founded upon the desire for successful activity and acknowledgment."

37 In *The Future of an Illusion* (New York, NY: Norton, 1961), Sigmund Freud asks his readers, "Think of the depressing contrast between the radiant intelligence of a healthy child and the feeble intellectual powers of the average adult" (p. 60). He blames religious education for "a large share of the blame for this relative atrophy" (ibid.). Whatever the cause, the contrast is stark and indeed disheartening.

It probably has to do with fear, with a deep kind of fear of change, anyway, I do not know what the cause is necessarily, but something has extinguished or deeply maimed this capacity to wonder. We have the disposition to acquire dispositions by constitution. Ideally, our habit of habit change and our capacity to change habits grow. In the course of our life, we can become more and more able – optimally, ideally – to acquire habits. The actual record, however, is rather disheartening, dispiriting. As the adage goes, “You cannot teach an old dog new tricks”. The point is that the older we get, the harder it so often is to change our habits. As folks get older, indeed, it is harder and harder for them to acquire new habits – harder, but not impossible. If you think about artists, Pablo Picasso would be one, but Miles Davis would be another example of how the habit of habit change can grow. Both were always in search of trying to play in new ways. They were always breaking down the ways in which they performed their art, trying to become like children again, learning and learning anew what it is to be a trumpet player, or what it is to be a visual artist. This capacity to reclaim our childhood, to be childlike, but not to be childish, is absolutely crucial, and it has to do with the habit of habit change.

W.N.: Thank you. We have meanwhile touched quite a number of topics, but we should no longer remain in twoness, to use Peirce’s expression.³⁸ If you allow, I now open the floor for questions. Here we have the first, from Lucia Santaella of TIDD, “Which connection do you see between today’s topic and our current pandemical crisis?”

V.C.: I see any number of connections. I think, the disposition to deny reality is a very deeply entrenched disposition in the human animal. One of the things I see in the situation of the pandemic is the disposition toward denial, and that might even be constitutional to the human animal. It seems to me that some people have the courage to confront the awful or the difficult, and other people tell themselves and tell others fairy tales. They are enamored of this.

It seems to me that there is an essential link between the search for truth and courage, and it goes to the very first thing you said. Because most of us, if not all of us, some of the time, lack the courage to change our lives.³⁹ Some people, all of the time, manifestly lack the courage to

³⁸ Actually, Peirce uses this expression occasionally in the derogatory sense of ‘dualism’, e.g., in “Immortality in the Light of Synechism” of c.1892 (CP 7.570): “Synechism [...] can never abide dualism. [...] It does not wish to exterminate the conception of twoness [...]. But dualism [...] is most hostile to synechism.”

³⁹ In “The Fixation of Belief” (1877), Peirce gives the example of Kepler’s courage in trying out one irrational hypothesis after another until he finally succeeded in changing the habits of scientific thought and the course of astronomy (CP 5.362).

change their lives. What would be the appropriate changes in the face of such a disaster, such an illness? It seems to me that we need to be both realistic and imaginative. It is not enough simply to be realistic, and it is not enough to be imaginative.⁴⁰

I think we can tease out any number of connections, and I think it is a very important question. Without being a Pollyanna, it seems that the pandemic gives us the possibility of reimagining much of our lives. Reimagining work, reimagining school, so, yes, it is awful. Yes, it is terrible! The number of deaths is just unconscionable, and those deaths must be attributed, to a great extent, to irresponsible and inattentive political leaders. Having said that, it is an awful situation, but what might we make of it? What good might we draw out of it? Among the possibilities, it seems to me, is reimagining work. It has perhaps been time we did that.

I love the question, but it requires a much, much fuller, more detailed, more nuanced answer than I can give now, but it is worthy of long hard thought.

W.N.: There are other questions, here is one, from Alexandre Quaresma, Rio de Janeiro, “The virus is on the frontier between the living and the non-living, is it capable of semiosis?”⁴¹

V.C.: That is a good question. In our world, at least as far as we can ascertain, there are only fuzzy borders. There are no absolutely sharp lines of demarcation. So, the living and the dead, the self and the other, culture and nature, at certain points, the borders between these are fuzzy. They are irreducibly fuzzy, and you cannot say this is this and that is that. Anytime you have an exchange, in which something on one side is transmitted or communicated to the other side, it seems to me you have an instance of semiosis. In direct answer to the question, it is a very good question, I would say yes! The virus, even if strictly speaking, the virus is not semiosis, although I have to think about that, it lends itself to being described and explained in semiotic terms. We would be at a disadvantage if we denied ourselves the semiotic terminology to describe and explain the kinds of interactions, transactions, and transmissions that are going across these fuzzy borders.

⁴⁰ In “The Fixation of Belief”, Peirce also gives an example, from the history of chemistry, of how imagination can bring about habit change: “Lavoisier’s method was not to read and pray, but to dream that some long and complicated chemical process would have a certain effect, [and...] to dream that with some modification it would have another result, and to end by publishing the last dream as a fact” (CP 5.363).

⁴¹ The question is the topic of Kalevi Kull and Winfried Nöth, “Virus semiosis”, *TECCOGS: Revista digital de tecnologías cognitivas*, v. 22, p. 13-20.

So, whether or not the virus, strictly speaking, is an instance of semiosis, what is going on needs, invites, and warrants being described and explained in semiotic terms.

W.N.: So, what are the other questions? Geane Alzamora from Belo Horizonte asks: “How can we prevent fake news from become habits?”⁴²

V.C.: Well, this is a very difficult question. I think that when we say “fake news” – and I assume that you are using this expression in this way –, it seems to me that we need to be clear that all news is perspectival, all news is, in certain respects, biased; it is from a certain point of view. If you read one paper, there might be a liberal bias, and when you read another paper, there might be a conservative bias. Biases in and of themselves do not make news fake. Fake news is a very different matter than simply biased news. All news is biased, some are less, others are more. News is less biased precisely because the journalists who circulate them are more conscious of their bias and try to counteract. But the issue of fake news is an extremely difficult one. It seems to me that it is a failure of education and a failure, more broadly, of a culture that allows some folks just to bombard each other with manipulated images and to shout slogans at one another. We have allowed this to gain the degree of centrality and legitimacy that it has gained in our culture. Is it possible, is it conceivable, is it imaginable to reform, in a radical way, the human discourse, the human dialogue, where we address the other in a certain manner that exhibits, displays, my respect for the humanity and the otherness of that person? It seems that we have our work cut out for us. The only way of getting rid of fake news is by generating, in an attractive way, using our media savvy, using our detailed knowledge of social psychology, the conditions for a genuine dialogue. And that is long, patient, hard work, but nothing short of that is going to make a difference.

W.N.: Here is another question, from Gilmar Hermes, de Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul: “Is it possible to talk about habits in social life, in some phenomenological manifestation between firstness and secondness, without self-control?”

V.C.: Thank you! I remember fondly of your time here in Rhode Island. I think it is indeed ultimately, an incomplete discussion insofar as we do not bring in thirdness. But there might be very good methodo-

⁴² This question is also much discussed at TIDD, see: Lucia Santaelle, *A pós-verdade é verdadeira ou falsa*, São Paulo: Estação das Letras e Cores, 2018.

logical reasons not to bring in self-control, or thirdness.⁴³ Because what happens too often is that we rush, and we rush over the nuances, and the details, and so on. If we talk about the habits of social life, we might need to get down and dirty for a lot longer with the aspects of firstness and secondness, without thinking of them so exclusively, or even primarily, in reference to self-control and thirdness. Think of Peirce's suggestion for the defining qualities of a good phenomenologist in his second Lowell Lecture on Pragmatism of 1903. For an artist, he lectures, the first quality is the faculty to see what stares us in the face.⁴⁴ We do not see. We see what is supposed to be there, but we do not see what is phenomenologically there. If we have an overriding concern with self-control and thirdness, we are, all together, all too likely, not to attend carefully enough to the wild spontaneous ways in which social habits operate and some of the hidden imperceptible forms of conflict. So, by all means, let us give these first two categories, these first two phenomenological categories their full due. Now, ultimately, I think there has to be a reference to self-control, but methodologically, that might be suspended for a good long time.

W.N.: Thank you. Further questions? Here is one by Soraya Ferreira, Juiz de Fora in Minas Gerais: "New York is beautifully painted with the phrase 'Love is the answer'. What changes or is changing in terms of habits?"

V.C.: Thank you for your question. So, again, to go back to *agape*, and it might seem that I should have made more progress in my life by now, but I have not. The language of the ancient Greeks was oftentimes richer than ours. They had three words for "love", *philia*, *agape*, and *eros*. These words might not have been altogether different in the sense that

43 Self-control is one of the phenomena of thirdness in Peirce's system of categories, for Peirce a criterium of reasoning as well as moral conduct: "The phenomena of reasoning are, in their general features, parallel to those of moral conduct. For reasoning is essentially thought that is under self-control, just as moral conduct is conduct under self-control. Indeed reasoning is a species of controlled conduct and as such necessarily partakes of the essential features of controlled conduct" ("Lowell Lectures" I.1, 3rd draught, 1903, CP 1.606).

44 "What we have to do, as students of phenomenology, is simply to open our mental eyes and look well at the phenomenon and say what are the characteristics that are never wanting in it, whether that phenomenon be something that outward experience forces upon our attention, or whether it be the wildest of dreams, or whether it be the most abstract and general of the conclusions of science. The faculties which we must endeavor to gather for this work are three. The first and foremost is that rare faculty, the faculty of seeing what stares one in the face, just as it presents itself, unreplaced by any interpretation, unsophisticated by any allowance for this or for that supposed modifying circumstance. This is the faculty of the artist who sees for example the apparent colors of nature as they appear" ("Lowell Lectures" II, 2nd draught, CP 5.41-42, 1903).

they might not be altogether separable. What does “love” have to do with this? In the final analysis, and in the beginning, I am disposed to say everything. Because one of the principal reasons why we are so maimed as human beings is that we were not loved in the way we might have been loved well, according to our parent’s and others’ best lights, their best intentions. And we are so complicated, delicate, and multifaceted that even the most loving parent might not have loved us in precisely the way we most needed to be loved. So, if love, in the beginning, is inadequate, that has reverberation throughout a lifetime, and in the end, it seems to me that it is precisely my willingness to give up on absolutely brute force in the face of brute opposition and try to find a way in which I can recognize the humanity of the other, even when that being is acting in the most inhumane ways. In the immediate circumstance, I have to get out of it and defend myself, but I ought not to allow myself to form attitudes toward the other that are fundamentally predicated on the negation of the other. Somehow, someway, I need to reimagine the situation such that the other as human and the other as other comes rather clearly into focus.

W.N.: Here is another question. This time from Monica Allan, São Paulo: “Would the use of rationality in the process of habit change not imply hypocrisy? How can we distinguish between truth and fake with respect to the self in this context?”

V.C.: I do not know, but this is a very good, although difficult question. One of the problems is that the word “rational” is ambiguous. I am not sure that we have to back and forth about the meaning of the words and the force of the question, but it seems to me that one of the tendencies we have is to equate logicity with rationality and then, also, to think that each one of those is the equivalent of “reasonable”. What I would argue is that there are actually distinct meanings here. “Rational” is not simply a synonym for the logical. Rational is always more than merely logical. As paradoxical as it might sound in English, or Portuguese, or German, “reasonable” does not carry the same nuances and the same valences as “rational”. It is one thing to be rational, and it is another thing, at least slightly different, to be reasonable.

There is the notion that we can come up with a set of rules, that we can identify an algorithm, a finite set of explicit rules, or that there are rules that can in principle be made explicit. This way of thinking seems to be a commitment, a defining commitment, of the rationalistic mind. It might not be reasonable at all to suppose that algorithms are at the root of everything. It may be that there are flexible, fluid, integrated, nuanced

habits that can, in some sense, be specified in the form of rules, that can, in some ways, be captured in the formula of algorithms. The lexical definitions in the dictionary or the various works used by any linguistic community only capture part of those linguistic habits. The dictionary is an attempt to distill the essence of the habit, but the distillation is never complete. There is always more to the habit that gets down on the page. It is precisely the habits that are primordial. The codes and the algorithms are secondary and derivative. It is precisely my disposition that makes me reasonable.

Peirce has a manuscript entitled “Reason’s Conscience”.⁴⁵ Among the things he implies there, one is that whereas a moral conscience issues mainly in imperatives, a logical conscience mainly issues in questions.⁴⁶ A moral conscience will issue negative and positive injunctions. Do not engage in acts of cruelty directed towards sentient beings. There are do’s and don’ts. It seems to me that the cultivation of reason is the cultivation of self-critical habits. I do not see that as narrowly or mechanically logical. I see it as a kind of fluid, artistic, sensitivity.

If we aim at reasonable self-control over our thought, our feelings, and our actions, what is then the question that the moment most calls for? In some sense, we imagine too often both that we know what the question is and that we will know what the answer is. But part of the

45 Charles S. Peirce, “Reason’s Conscience: A Practical Treatise on the Theory of Discovery; Wherein logic is conceived as Semeiotic” (1904). The manuscript is described in detail in Richard S. Robin (comp.), *Annotated catalogue of the papers of Charles S. Peirce*, Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1967. It has been edited in part in: Charles S. Peirce, *New Elements of Mathematics*, vol. 4, ed. Carolyn Eisele, Bloomington, IN: Indiana Press, 1976, p. 185-215, and in Charles S. Peirce, *Historical Perspectives on Peirce’s Logic of Science*, vol. 2, ed. Carolyn Eisele, The Hague: Mouton, 1985, p. 801-851. – The page references in the following are to Eisele’s edition of 1985.

The manuscript deals with two issues of relevance to the question of rationality, (1) the relationship between logic and other kinds of reasoning and (2) the relationship between logic and ethics. On (1), Peirce writes, “Many of our reasonings [...] are performed instinctively, and it must not, for an instant, be supposed that I should recommend that such modes of action be given up in favor of theoretical procedures, except to compare theory with practice [...]. Other reasonings, although not exactly instinctive, have become so habitual as to resemble instinctive actions. In many cases, the habits have come to us from tradition” (p. 803). – On (2), Peirce writes, “The business of ethics is to [...] find out [what] the familiar but confused idea of moral goodness really consists in. [...] Moral conduct is conduct which is self-controlled so as to be steadily directed toward a sort of purpose which ethics will define. [...] Logic, developing its own purpose in a similar way, soon finds that it is essential to the action of reasoning that it should be self-controlled: for without that, all criticism of it, as good or bad, is idle. It would, therefore, be nothing but an application of ethics to a particular kind of conduct” (p. 832).

46 E.g., What is the evidence for this claim? Is there an ambiguity hidden here?

problem, it seems, is that we are not deeply Socratic enough. We are not really in possession yet of the question. What is going on? Yeah, we have some inklings, we have some intuitions, we have some intimate intimations of what is going on, but we do not know deeply, fully, finally enough what the very questions are that we ought to be posing and addressing. It is precisely that I take reason as the capacity to ask the question that we have not yet asked and to turn the whole discussion around in new directions.

Ludwig Wittgenstein has this wonderful analogy. Someone is in a room and is trying to get out. The window is too high. The door is closed, and seems to be locked, but all the person in the room has to do is turn around and realize that, behind him, “the door has been open all the time.”⁴⁷ We often have this feeling of being stuck or entrapped or even imprisoned, and we cannot find our way out. But what might be required is *metanoia*,⁴⁸ to have our minds, our souls, turned around in a new direction. Then, and only then, will we find a way out. Then, and only then, will we find the questions we need to be posing.

W.N.: I believe this is a wonderful conclusion. There may be more questions, but I cannot imagine a better ending than your last insights into habits and habit change. Therefore, I suggest that we continue thinking about our reflections instead of asking new questions. Nevertheless, I would like to give you the last word.

V.C.: In conclusion, then, I want to say two things. First, I would like to remind us of Rilke’s letters to a young poet, in particular, his advice in which he says, “Do not try to answer the question, you are not yet in the position to answer the question, you must first live the question”.⁴⁹ I think that is a very important piece of advice, not merely for an aspiring poet, but all of us. That we have to have the patience, the humility,

47 Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford University Press, 1972), 52; cf. *Philosophical Investigations*, #108, #123, #309. Also, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and value*, ed. Georg Henrik Von Wright and Heikki Nyman, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 42e: “A man will be *imprisoned* in a room with a door that’s unlocked and opens inwards; as long as it does not occur to him to *pull* rather than push it.”

48 The Greek *μετάνοια* means ‘after-thought’ or ‘beyond-thought’. It has the biblical meanings of ‘transformative change of heart’ and ‘repentance’. For its use in philosophy, see Norman Wirzba, “From maieutics to metanoia: Levinas’s understanding of the philosophical task”, *Man and World*, vol. 28, no. 12, p. 9-144, 1995.

49 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*, Leipzig: Insel, 1929. English: *Letter to a young poet*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton, London: Penguin, 2011, Letter #4 of July 16, 1903: “Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now.” Also available at: carrothers.com/rilke4.htm; accessed March 10, 2021.

and the courage to live the questions of our time before we rather frantically and aggressively try to answer these questions. The most important thing before trying to answer any question is to live it more fully than we have thus far. Only then will we avoid superficiality or glibness. Second, I would like to express my deep gratitude. Winfried, I love conversing with you, I love the way you conduct an interview: I always feel that I am better than I usually am and I feel this is so because of the quality and depth of your questions. Of course, my gratitude extends to each of those in the audience. As in our previous exchanges, the questions from the audience have been consistently of the highest quality, and so I am very grateful to the members of the audience, all of them, for simply their attention and for those who posed those wonderful questions. A simple expression of a deep and encompassing gratitude is truly my last word: Obrigado.

W.N.: Thank you once more, dear Vincent, and thank you, Luis Felipe, for the technical organization of our meeting. Last but not least, let us also thank Lucia Santaella, the *spiritus rector* of this series of reflections.