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A Taste for Habits: On Preference Self-Construction

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Abstract. This paper explores the tensions and potential contradictions in the “self-construction” of habits and preferences, arguing that preferences and tastes not only arise from habit formation but also contribute to the development of new habits. Changing tastes necessitates self-reflection on our current preferences and habits, which then become subjects of evaluation, transformation, and alteration from a higher-order perspective. It will be argued that modifying the structure of one’s habits and preferences requires various forms of (self)-distancing: these include the impossibility of immediate transformation, recognizing the gradual nature of change, and acknowledging the limits of direct intentionality and control in the transformative process. These points ultimately reveal the inherent indeterminacy and openness of any self-cultivation endeavor involving preference-based habits, highlighting its balance between controllability and the potential for its loss.

Keywords. Habit change, preferences, taste cultivation, self-transformation.

1. *The relationship between habit and taste*

The central goal of this paper is to investigate some key aspects of what it means to modify habits (and thus certain types of inclinations),

as well as the self-transformative processes involved. A premise of this issue concerns the relationship between *habits* and *preferences*. It will be argued that preferences (and, from a more specific aesthetic viewpoint, “taste”) might be considered forms of habits, since habits involve inclinations, a propensity to act in a certain way, and therefore a desire to do so. Changes in habits and preferences are closely interrelated; however, self-modification also involves adopting new preferences to change the structure of our existing habits. Furthermore, it may be useful to differentiate between two types of habits. The first type includes habits that are essentially based on preferences and likings, such as our taste in music or other personal inclinations. The second type encompasses habits not directly linked to personal preferences, including skills related to learning specific behaviors, like driving a car or mastering a sport¹. In these instances, one acquires a motor skill. In the other case, the goal is to acquire or refine an “appreciative” skill, which involves cultivating a new set of preferences or altering existing ones. The subject is constituted by its system of inclinations and preferences: therefore, the issue of self-induced taste modification and cultivation in the aesthetic domain is crucial, as tastes and preferences are essential components of our identities. Hence, self-transformation in these contexts is always characterized by a process in which the transforming subject becomes an object of transformation, altering and modifying its attitudes, perceptions, and inclinations. This process is marked by unpredictability and inherent uncertainty.

Under the term “preferences” we include an individual’s inclinations toward specific experiences, his commitment to certain behaviors, and search for determinate environments. From this perspective, the notion of preference is linked, on one hand, to the broader concept of *desire* – which, unlike preferences, can be vague and undefined in its object. On the other hand, it encompasses the more specific notion of *taste* (understood as aesthetic liking and appreciation). “Taste” is also related to a person’s aesthetic orientation and sensibility, and her way of carrying herself in the world, which thus forms an “ethos”, bringing us again closer to the notion of habit. Michel Foucault described the possession of an *ēthos* as a «mode of being for the subject, along with a certain way of acting, a way visible to others [...] in his clothing, appearance, gait, in the calm with which he responded to every event, and so on» (Foucault [1997]: 281). From this standpoint, preferences, taste and habits, although distinct concepts, appear similar as they are manifestations of what we might call *inclinations*: inclinations to choose, to behave, to seek certain sensorial experiences². Therefore, the relationship between habits and preferences/desires can be seen to be partially circular in its nature. More precisely:

(a) Habits determine behavioral inclinations and consequently shape the *preferences* for certain actions and experiences. In aesthetics, habitual familiarization often leads to increased appreciation, habits and cultural preference are built

through repetition and experience. If I have learned to follow the intricacies of nineteenth-century Russian novels, their appreciation over time will cost me less and less effort compared to the first readings, allowing me to enjoy (and prefer) reading more and more intellectually demanding texts. Every habit, even the negative ones (like addictions), is accompanied by desires to do something, even in the case we would also prefer *not* to have those desires, as I will discuss later.

One point to note is that those desires or preferences are not necessarily the object of conscious awareness. There is, rather, a gradualism in which actions, through habits, become less and less conscious and less and less object of direct will and control, and more and more involuntary and automatic. If we follow the classical thinking on habits by Félix Ravaisson (Ravaisson [1838]), once formed, habits are causes of actions without the intervention of will, but still entail the (unconscious) desire to bring about the action³.

We often have a preference, or even a “taste”, for the actions we repeatedly perform. This preference can manifest as a sense of comfort when acting in accordance with our habits, and discomfort when acting differently. Essentially, an inclination to do something equates to a desire or impulse to do that thing.

(b) Conversely, inclinations and preferences may contribute to the formation of habits. A subject inclined to do something will develop a habit through repetition of this action. Inclination and attitudes could be considered deep preferences that guide the basic *orientation* of a subject in the world. Rather than being entities passively existing in the environment, our bodies inherently possess specific ways of engaging with the world on the basis of basic impulses and instincts that are ingrained in our nature and genetic make-up, and are woven into our identity as living organisms and physical bodies. This includes innate inclinations, desires, and ways of orienting oneself and navigating in the environment. This view is not far from the idea of the body as a set of acquired aptitudes expressed in the phenomenological perspective of Merleau-Ponty, as it will be made more explicit later.

2. Higher-order preferences and habit change

Our capacity for self-reflection can interrupt the circular relationship between habits and preferences, enabling us to critically assess them and cultivate a desire for change. In other words, habits can themselves become objects of reflection and intervention. As highlighted by various philosophical traditions, both animals and humans are “habit-based” organisms; both undergo habit transformation, but humans uniquely have the capacity for self-reflective change of habits, or at least to envision the possibility or opportunity for such change. We have habits, but we sometimes *desire* or want to change them. Therefore, the transfor-

mation of habits is guided by specific preferences, which we might describe as “preferences over preferences”, if we consider habits as behavioral inclinations toward preferred acts and states. This critical self-reflection can be conscious, but it can also manifest as what Lakoff and Johnson (Lakoff, Johnson [1999]) termed an additional “layer of the mind” – a form of practical intelligence inherent where reflexivity becomes an automated component of one’s way of existence. This implies that habit-induced inclinations and desires can be the object of higher-order transformative desires. A typical example is our awareness of being victims of bad habits or even addictions and the consequent desire to change the structure of the desires determined by those habits.

One problematic aspect in this context was insightfully articulated by Arthur Schopenhauer. He posited that a person might do whatever they want, but they cannot choose what they want. This conundrum becomes salient in scenarios where we seek to alter our desires, perhaps cultivating an appreciation for certain artwork, acquiring a novel taste for food, adopting a fashion trend, or embracing a lifestyle. These are instances where we aim to voluntarily modify our tastes, but the issue is, as highlighted by Schopenhauer, whether such a transformation is feasible at all. Conversely, a philosophical tradition extending at least from Aristotle suggests that a person attains autonomy and freedom by reflecting on and, if deemed necessary, altering their preferences. Consequently, the essence of human freedom and autonomy shifts from merely “doing what one wishes to do” to “deciding what to prefer and wish for”. In other words, our aspiration extends beyond liberation from *external* constraints to include emancipation from *internal* ones as well.

2.1 *The avant-garde imperative*

A specific and interesting instance of the drive for preference self-change is the case of contemporary art practices. The assertions of notable figures from the artistic history of the 20th century illuminate this point effectively. Marcel Duchamp once challenged conventional notions of artistic taste with his declaration, «I have forced myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste» (Janis & Janis [1945]: 18⁴). In a similar vein, Andy Warhol later remarked, «There are so many people here to compete with that changing your tastes to what other people don’t want is your only hope of getting anything» (Warhol [1975]: 93). These statements epitomize a fundamental characteristic of the artistic avant-garde of the previous century. Clement Greenberg reflected on this transformation, observing how «It may have been the first time when artists themselves took entire charge of taste» (Greenberg [1999]: 119), and compelling the public to engage more deeply and rigorously to comprehend the new artistic language. This marked a paradigm shift in the avant-garde era, reversing

the traditional dynamics between art and personal preference. Under this new framework, an individual's taste does not serve as the yardstick for assessing art; rather, it becomes imperative for one's taste to adapt and align with the artwork, especially when confronted with the unfamiliar or the conceptually challenging.

This paradigm shift significantly influenced both the training of art students and the perceptions of art audiences. Students immersed in contemporary, experimental art are not just refining skills grounded in traditional aesthetic standards. Rather, they engage in a process of developing a new aesthetic awareness, aiming to surpass the limitations of their existing preferences. In a parallel manner, individuals attending contemporary art exhibitions are encouraged to adopt an open and adaptable attitude. This approach enables them to recalibrate their tastes, thereby unlocking new dimensions of understanding and appreciation for artworks that may initially appear alien or perplexing.

Engaging with one's own tastes, purposefully molding them to accommodate the unfamiliar, can be interpreted as a manifestation of the *avant-garde imperative* (Bohn [2013]). This imperative manifests a relentless pursuit of innovation, a commitment to being at the forefront, and a willingness to take charge and reshape the public's aesthetic taste. Contemporary art, through its continuous self-questioning, merges artistic practice with theories about itself and is the symptom of a modern tendency to self-reflexivity. In this scenario, culture turns its gaze inward, perpetually undermining and challenging its own norms. Echoing this sentiment, Alain Badiou noted, «the art of the twentieth century is a reflective art, an art that wants to exhibit its own process» (Badiou [2007]: 49-50), and, we may add, an art that wants to redefine each time our appreciative habits.

However, the effort in changing and adapting tastes, preferences and habits is not exclusively related to art and avant-garde, but on the contrary is a pervasive everyday practice. The act of “coming to like something” extends far beyond the sphere of artistic and aesthetic appreciation. It encompasses every effort directed towards the self-guided manipulation of preferences. Anyone attempting to alter their habits, whether it's quitting smoking, choosing healthier food options, or reducing internet usage, is engaging in a similar process of preference transformation. The roots of this reflexive behavior can be traced to the high value placed on individual autonomy and self-determination.

2.2 Horizontal and vertical dynamics in habits and preferences

A subject may also undergo *internal* transformations of preferences and habits, as well as *external* influences from the community of other people. This dynamic creates a web of interactions where individuals both influence and are influenced by the broader society and culture. Changes in taste can stem from discussions and debates that lead to new understandings and viewpoints: for example, a per-

suasive argument might convince me to see the artistic value in a certain piece of music. A change in perspective can persuade me of the aesthetic value or innovation of an art style according to certain normative standards. An important question here is whether simply being convinced is enough to actually change what we like and accordingly modify our behavior and habits. In other words, it is debatable if our preferences could be shaped by merely deciding to like something based on others' opinions, no matter how intellectually compelling. Truly appreciating an art form in a new way, especially one that initially goes against our preferences, requires more than just being convinced. It involves an *internal* self-transformative process of changing how we perceive and appreciate things, a change in preference and consumption habits. Let's take atonal music as an example. A well-argued case about its aesthetic and musical value might intellectually convince me of its significance. But to genuinely start enjoying atonal music, more is needed than just intellectual agreement. This is where self-driven practices come into play, such as trying to adopt a new perspective in listening, cultivating habits through repetition and familiarity. It's about enabling appreciation not just intellectually but also on an affective level by means of new habits. The cultivation of taste is not merely a passive change resulting from exposure but is actively brought about by self-transformative practices.

This brings us to the general question of whether and to what extent habits and taste could be molded in some desired direction. For individuals to successfully modify their preferences, they must first possess the capacity to critically examine their own predilections and then discern which of these they deem worthy of alteration. Bertrand Russell eloquently touches on this concept: «We do not even always consider our own tastes the best: we may prefer bridge to poetry, but think it is better to prefer poetry to bridge» (Russell [1994]: 21). From Russell's perspective, the adage *de gustibus non est disputandum* loses its applicability when applied to oneself: it's entirely feasible not to endorse one's own preferences. As a result, situations arise where our desires do not align with our likes, and vice versa. This discrepancy underscores our capability to adopt a more objective stance towards our own preferences, leading to the formation of *second-order preferences*, or "meta-preferences" ("preferences about preferences", as we previously said), tastes concerning tastes. Harry Frankfurt articulates this distinction, stating, «the ability to reflect on my desires is what distinguishes me from an animal that may desire to do things but cannot lay its desires out and pick among the ones that conflict» (Frankfurt [1971]: 5). Russell's observation illuminates the potential disconnect between our immediate, or first-order, preferences and those of a higher, second-order level. This hierarchy implies that one's immediate tastes might not necessarily align with their more considered, reflective preferences. The ability to evaluate and potentially alter these preferences underscores a significant aspect of human cognition and autonomy. It is

this evaluative capacity that allows for an understanding and reshaping of one's tastes and desires, thereby enabling a deeper engagement with one's preferences and, by extension, with the world. But it is also necessary here to distinguish two entirely different types of dynamics between inclinations and preferences, which also result in two different types of relationship between habits:

(1) The first is a situation of "horizontal" tension between conflicting inclinations. This is the case where two or more currently acting wants are in conflict with each other, such as the desire to keep fit by going running, but also the desire to stay longer in bed. In such a situation, both impulses (and the related habits) are present and coexisting. In psychological terms, this is similar to what is described in Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance [1957], where simultaneous conflicting beliefs or attitudes cause discomfort, leading to an alteration in one or more attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors to reduce the dissonance and restore balance. Philosophically, this scenario brings us back to David Hume's view on the clash of passions, where he suggests that human behavior is the outcome of conflicting impulses. In such scenarios, the interaction between competing desires (and their associated habits) is dynamic, since one habit might overshadow another, or they might evolve to a point where the conflict is resolved, possibly through the dominance of one habit or a transformative adaptation of the conflicting inclinations. One habit may be neutralized by the consistent presence of a stronger habit opposed to it or be transformed to the point of ceasing to be in conflict with it.

(2) The second type is a "vertical" tension between present inclinations and desires to modify, neutralize or expand those inclinations, as in all cases where we want to cultivate a taste, modify a behavioral trait, build or lessen a habit. In this context, an individual experiences a present, actual inclination alongside a second-order desire *not* to have that inclination or to have a different one, which is however not yet actual. For example, one might aspire to develop a habit of reading a few pages of a novel or exercising daily, without having yet established this habit. This reflects Harry Frankfurt's concept of second-order volitions, where an individual reflects upon and evaluates their first-order desires, determining which desires they wish to act upon. The psychological process involved here is akin to those described by theories on self-regulation, which posit that individuals exert control over their own behavior through the process of monitoring, evaluating, and modifying their emotional and behavioral responses to meet their goals.

As an additional observation, the concept of "preferring to prefer something" or "wanting to want something" can be seen as the aspiration to cultivate inclinations that we perceive as beneficial. For instance, this might manifest in a wish to develop an affinity for activities like meditation or healthy cooking. In some instances, these second-order preferences represent broader evaluations of what we consider

a “better self,” without a strong commitment to actualizing these preferences. Thus, it’s possible to hold seemingly contradictory views without inconsistency. For example, one might acknowledge, «jazz music is artistically profound and should be appreciated, yet I enjoy pop music more»; or «award-winning documentaries represent the zenith of filmmaking, but I find myself watching action movies». In this context, meta-preferences can be understood as normative ideals we hold in high regard, contrasting with our current practices. They act somewhat like a super-ego, highlighting the gap between our actual behaviors and our ideal standards, thereby making us conscious of our shortcomings.

The reasons to induce a change in preferences and habits may be related to our feeling of discrepancy or inadequacy between the perception of our personal identity and our desired public identity. There may also be reasons related to our desire for conformity, or our desire to construct a certain image of ourselves that allows us to feel part of a certain social category. These are issues related for instance to the sociology of taste in the tradition of Bourdieu, but also have been extensively dealt in the history of philosophy, from Aristotele’s ethics, to the tension toward self-improvement discussed in classical Stoicism, and in contemporary time, for instance, by Foucault’s meditations on the “technologies of the self”. More recently, Peter Sloterdijk’s imperative «you must change your life» (Sloterdijk [2009], [2013]) suggests that humanity has always been engaged with “anthropotechnics”, namely methods and practices through which we have historically attempted to improve ourselves, both physically and mentally. From this perspective, humanity is not a fixed state but a constantly evolving project shaped by our own efforts to self-transformation.

3. *Varieties of distancing*

One crucial aspect in the issue of preference and habit change is the potential for immediate transformation inherent in the layering of subjective states. Take, for instance, the concept of a “meta-emotion”, an emotion about another emotion. An example of this could be experiencing guilt for not feeling joyful about a gift received on one’s birthday. Even our passions can undergo change through self-reflection: one might feel embarrassed about their own surge of jealousy, or perhaps frustrated with themselves for feeling embarrassed, or even angered by their own anger. This emotional layering can lead to a transformation in the original mental state. For instance, a mother might initially feel anger towards her crying newborn, only to later experience shame over this anger, which in turn dissipates the initial feeling of anger (Elster [1999]). However, it is crucial to distinguish between phenomena like “emotion upon emotion” and “preferring a preference”. A preference is not an emotional reaction; it is more accurately

an inclination, a taste, and ultimately, a habit. The cultivation of tastes is not an unreflective process as could be the case of emotions. Moreover, unlike a meta-emotion that reacts to an existing internal state (such as shame in response to anger), a meta-preference is built upon an inclination or habit *that is not yet present*. Moreover, while the case of “meta-emotions” can catalyze immediate change, on the contrary altering preferences and habits require a gradual process and a sustained effort over time. Preferences, tastes, and habits do not shift instantaneously and are inherently more challenging to mold. They echo Aristotle’s concept of *hexis*, a state or disposition of character that is cultivated over time, suggesting a gradual process of habituation, contrary to the immediacy and sometimes uncontrollable nature of *pathos*, of emotional responses. Similarly, Kant’s differentiation between inclinations (*Neigungen*), described as “habitual desires” and affects and passions (*Leidenschaften*) points to the fact that while affects might be sudden surges of emotions, inclination and habits are more stable and require a deliberate and often prolonged effort, guided by reason, in order for the individual “to cultivate himself, civilize himself, and moralize himself” (Kant [1797]: 324)⁵.

Aristotle, in a notable section of his *Nicomachean Ethics* (2:1, 1103a15–b25), asserts that virtues and character traits do not emerge spontaneously but require consistent practice and cultivation: «we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts». Aristotle underscores the notion that virtues are not innate but are instead cultivated through consistent actions and thoughtful reflections. This principle implies that to become virtuous, one must act as though they already possess virtue. While there is no certainty of success, this approach allows us to indirectly influence our preferences by acting as though they have already been altered, thus bypassing our existing inclinations. This concept, while seemingly paradoxical, aligns with Michel Foucault’s idea of the “practice of freedom” as the effort of taking a critical distance from one’s own limitations and constraints, a process of self-examination and liberation from internal barriers.

The Aristotelian example highlights the point that changing preferences and changing habits requires working on oneself by means of a kind of self-distancing: since the system of my habits, preferences and tastes partly constitute what I am, changing them means to envisage something different and other from myself. Furthermore, precisely because these elements are so deeply ingrained in our identity, any transformative process necessitates a prolonged, sustained effort. It is illogical to assume that one could simply decide to adopt a new habit or preference and instantly experience this change through a mere act of will. If such immediacy were possible, it would imply that the desired change was not genuinely needed, suggesting that the sought-after habit or preference was, in some form, already present. Therefore, self-imposed interventions are not with-

out their challenges or guarantees. Firstly, certain inclinations are deeply rooted in our nature and biology, making them resistant to change. Secondly, these interventions represent deliberate efforts to modify attitudes that otherwise mostly originate from unreflective processes. The act of “deciding to like” something is therefore fraught with ambiguity and complexity. In Arielli [2016], for example, I suggested a typology of the ways habits and preference could be transformed. These include behavioral strategies like repeating an aesthetic experience in order to build familiarity, acting as if the ability to aesthetically appreciate is already given, engaging with individuals who already have the desired taste, adopting their habits, manners, and viewpoints. Additionally, cognitive strategies such as rethinking and altering one’s perspective on what to appreciate, drawing comparisons and analogies between what is liked and unliked, and emphasizing the positive aspects of what one is learning to appreciate are also part of these practices (see also Arielli [2017]).

Beside the “staging” of behavioral habits or preferences that are not yet there, or the forcing of one’s own inclination through effort of self-transformation, all these practices are characterized by the fact that they cannot be *direct* actions to induce a preference or habit change, but rather they *might* contribute to this change by engaging and exposing the subject to experience and environments, to thoughts and imaginative content, that could indirectly have as a consequence a self-transformative effect. While a detailed exploration of these “techniques of self-cultivation” is beyond the scope of this paper, it is crucial to emphasize its central point and core argument: practices of self-transformation are actions marked by varying degrees of *distancing* from one’s actual attitudes and habits, and the outcomes of these processes are inherently indeterminate. Taking into account what has been discussed above, and focusing on the separation between transformative second-order preference and its realization, we can outline the following *varieties of distancing* from oneself:

(a) *Self-distancing*. As we said, higher-order evaluations entail a desired perspective on oneself or even a normative stance on how one *should* be. We may have preferences *not to have* a specific preference or habit we do have, or we may have the desire to have a specific preference we still don’t have. In these circumstances, we introduce multiple self-constructs in which we distance ourselves from the idea of the authentic preferences of an alleged “true self”. In this context, the desire to distance oneself from the authentic self and acquire different tastes or habitual behaviors becomes the presupposition for the possibility of conscious self-evolution. The fluidity of our self-perception allows for the emergence of new preferences and dispositions, which may previously have been alien or even antithetical to the individual’s perceived identity. The concept of self-distancing can be extended to the realm of moral and ethical development as well. Here, self-distancing becomes a mechanism for moral

self-reflexivity, enabling individuals to reassess their ethical beliefs in light of new experiences and understandings, in an ongoing process that does not cease at the end of the growth phase, but rather represents a permanent state of becoming.

(b) *Temporal distance*. When we set a goal in self-cultivation, we cannot predict if and *when* the achievement of this goal might happen. There is an irreducible distance between the initial stage in which a subject engages in self-transformation and the actual point in the future in which that transformation could be said to have been reached. No matter how strongly desired, habit transformation necessarily requires a temporal duration that is *incompressible*. The inherent requirement of effort and duration to acquire different habits and tastes is not a contingent aspect of self-transformation, but an essential one. We could even say that temporal duration and effort are *conditions of possibility* for the emergence of new habits and preferences. The “journey” a subject must endure is not avoidable, otherwise we would not be able to speak of an actual change. From a more speculative perspective, the potentiality of change and the very act of “becoming” are intimately linked to the idea of duration, as Deleuze pointed out in his analyses of Bergsonian philosophy («Being is alteration, alteration is substance. And that is what Bergson calls duration»; Deleuze [2004]: 25). Deleuze’s philosophy notoriously focuses on the role of difference as a creative and generative power, where difference involves not only divergence and evolution but also a distinctive kind of repetition, which in turn is closely linked to temporality. Repetition, far from mere duplication, takes on various forms, including habit: «for Deleuze, habit is thus the condition for the emergence of time itself» (Grosz [2013]: 231).

(c) Distance from direct will and intentional plans. While one might aim for a specific change, such transformation often occurs as an *indirect* effect of engaging with various situations, environments, and behaviors that might consequently lead to the desired change. This is particularly true for habits involving deep preferences and inclinations, like aesthetic taste. It is not feasible to formulate a plan where, solely through an act of direct will, one can determine a change in oneself just by implementing this plan step by step. The goal of self-transformation must be achieved by “bypassing” oneself, circumnavigating one’s current dispositions through exercises, efforts, and exposure to experiences and environments that can induce such transformation. This concept is analogous to Jon Elster’s notion of phenomena that are “essentially by-products” of actions undertaken for other ends and cannot be the direct and willful effects of those actions ⁶. For example, I cannot decide to develop a habit of appreciating a specific musical genre, such as atonal music, by means of a pre-established plan, but I can engage in acts and expose myself to environments that may eventually result in this change of taste.

(d) Distance from (full) control or “indeterminate self-construction”. In the moment we give ourselves to a transformative experience, through contact and engagement with the world, with other people, and experiences that have the potential to change our attitudes, we open up to something whose outcome is essentially indeterminate. Open possibilities and indeterminacy are linked to the subject’s encounter with the contingency of experiences and with the dynamic and unpredictable nature of being in the world. As such, any project related to self-cultivation may start as a conscious commitment, but it generates an element of *excess*, it could deviate and distance itself from the initial goals, leading to indefinite and open-ended outcomes.

This is particularly true for changes in aesthetic habits and preferences. The processes of self-transformation in this domain are not entirely plannable since the individual is intimately involved in the transformative processes. Aesthetic habits, taste and preferences deeply shape a person’s identity, making it challenging to predict the transformative effects of preferences that one does not yet possess on the person itself. Furthermore, self-transformative processes of aesthetic habits cannot be equated with linear self-planning, which usually involves a clear start and end, along with a rationally predetermined sequence of steps, akin to acquiring a specific manual skill, like in driving, or in language learning. The endeavor to change one’s taste does not come with a certainty of success; it is susceptible to the possibility of failure.

4. *Conclusion: self-cultivation between control and loss of control*

Aesthetic habits are more than just a specific type of habit, as mentioned at the beginning. Upon closer examination, however, all habits, in a broader sense, also possess an aesthetic aspect. Habits involve our physical self and are not solely based on intellectual processes. They are based on bodily and sensory ways through which we interact with and perceive the world. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty’s influential insights, which are central to the debate on habits, suggest using the concept of *style* to describe the ways of conducting oneself in the world, the «certain manner of dealing with situations» (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 382) that identifies an individual and differentiates it from others. Style articulates the ways an individual encounters, experiences and responds to his environment. From this viewpoint, Merleau-Ponty draws a comparison between artistic style, which encompasses ways of perceiving and depicting the world, and individual behavioral style, namely habits. Just as an artist develops a unique style through repeated practice and engagement with their medium, individuals also develop unique perceptual and behavioral styles in response to their experiences and interactions with the world. In this context, the creation and transfor-

mation of habits can be likened to an act of *stylization*. Through style an artist produces what Merleau-Ponty, citing Malraux, termed a «coherent deformation»: the style describe how an artist filters and interprets the world in his works, and so the “style” of an individual consists in how he deals with the situations he encounters in everyday life, how he acts and perceives, which essentially forms the structure of his habits.

Habit formation is thus a form of stylization, a (self-)transformative molding of one’s own ways of being and perceiving. The management of the self is a dynamic and never-ending effort that lies at the core of every attempt, imperfect at it is, to transform one’s own preferences and tastes. It consists in strategies with which we attempt to question and (coherently) “deform” the system of our actual inclinations in new forms. Merleau-Ponty describes “the acquisition of habit as a rearrangement and renewal of the corporeal schema” (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 164), as the result of the encounter between the individual, their body, and the world with which they interact. The outcome of these encounters is not predetermined, nor is it identical across all subjects⁷. This is analogous to Paul Ricoeur’s remarks in his *Freedom and Nature* [1950, 1966], where he states that a habit cannot be reduced «to a simple addition of invariable elementary movements among which repetition introduced or reinforced an associative bond». Rather, a «habit is a new structuring in which the meaning of elements changes radically» (Ricoeur [1950, 1966]: 287-288). In other words, habits oscillate between intentional cultivation and radical restructuring with outcomes that are not predetermined⁸. Self-cultivation goes beyond the idea of a defined or pre-determined process and gives rise to changes that might produce something beyond or other than what could be articulated in advance, such that its results will be indefinite and cannot be predicted. If our identity is on one hand the product of fluid and complex processes, determined by factors beyond our control, on the other hand individual autonomy and control manifest as the constant effort to observe, reflect and act upon those processes.

The essential idea here revolves around the balance between control and its absence, between deliberate intention and the unpredictability of the process. This unpredictability is due to the contingent nature of what we encounter, which can lead us on various unexpected paths of personal evolution. In this context, Catherine Malabou [2004] offered interesting theoretical implications around the concept of habit and *plasticity*, drawing from Hegel but applying it to the contemporary discourse of neuroscience. She questions the philosophical dichotomy that oscillates between strict determinism and the complete randomness in the journey of self-development. According to Malabou, transformative plasticity is a synthesis between deliberate acts of self-control and moments of uncontrolled “explosions” within the transformative process⁹.

The process of (self-)cultivation is inherently open-ended, and while one can successfully incorporate certain ways of being into their habitual behaviors, the

actual implementation in daily life often turns out to be unpredictable and beyond what was initially intended. Committing to the acquisition of new habits and preferences involves several stages, as we have seen. In this process, an individual engages in what can be described as a partially “controlled loss of control” committing himself to new contexts and experiences that subtly but inexorably will lead to a transformation.

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Notes

- 1 Although it cannot be ignored that the development of skills and competences is often accompanied by the emergence of a preference and pleasure in exercising such skills.
- 2 As David Hume (2.3.5.1) stated: «Custom has two *original* effects upon the mind, in bestowing a *facility* in the performance of any action or the conception of any object; and afterward a *tendency or inclination* toward it».
- 3 «As effort fades away in movement and as action becomes freer and swifter, the action itself becomes more of a tendency, an inclination that no longer awaits the commandments of the will but rather anticipates them, and which even escapes entirely and irremediably both will and consciousness» (Ravaisson [1838]: 51; making reference to Maine de Biran). See also Sinclair [2019]).
- 4 As cited in Janis & Janis (1945, p. 18).
- 5 In Wilson (2016).
- 6 Elster (1981): «Some positively defined states that similarly elude the mind that reaches out for them are the following: belief, courage, dignity, sincerity, spontaneity, pleasure, happiness, anger, love. [...] none of them can be brought about simply by the will's saying so».
- 7 «The situations may differ widely from case to case, and the response movements may be entrusted sometimes to one operative organ, sometimes to another, both situations and responses in the various cases having in common not so much a partial identity of elements as a shared meaning» (Merleau-Ponty [1945, 2005]: 164-165).
- 8 «Habit, thus described, could take on a human meaning if its plasticity permitted it to become subordinated to unceasingly new intentions» (Ricoeur [1950, 1966]: 288).
- 9 «It is as though we had before our eyes a sort of caricature of the philosophical problem of self-constitution, between dissolution and impression of form. [...] refuse to be flexible individuals who combine a permanent control of the self with a capacity to self-modify at the whim of fluxes, transfers, and exchanges, for fear of explosion. To cancel the fluxes, to lower our self-controlling guard, to accept exploding from time to time: this is what we should do with our brain» (Malabou [2004, 2008]: 78-79).

