

Moral Habits

The Art of Living Subconsciously

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Introduction

I have a pop quiz for everyone this morning. Two simple questions.

Question #1: How many of you got dressed this morning? If your hand isn't up, you'd better be dressed in either your birthday suit or your pajamas.

Question #2: How many of you consciously chose to get dressed rather than go naked? Raise your hand if you asked yourself: Do I really need to wear clothes to these lectures? Will David and Diana really mind? (Well, I'm glad that all of you who did ponder whether to get dressed or not came to the same decision.)

How did we manage to get dressed this morning without a conscious decision to do so? By habit. Because we get dressed every morning, we knew to get dressed this morning. It's a no-brainer. We let our subconscious guide our actions, saving ourselves the time and trouble of a conscious choice.

We face similar ethical no-brainers on a daily basis. Should I pay for the gas I just pumped? Should I lie to my spouse? Should I clap or throw tomatoes at the end of this lecture? Since we know that we will always pay for the gas, tell the truth, and throw tomatoes, there's no need to consciously contemplate what we'll do on any particular occasion. Instead, we automatize these common ethical decisions through moral habits.

Today, in speaking on moral habits, my basic goal is to convince you that moral habits are necessary for effectively applying our ethical principles to the particulars of our lives. If we want to live the Objectivist ethics, we need to deliberately cultivate good moral habits.

On the surface, moral habits seem to rub the Objectivist ethics the wrong way. After all, as Objectivists, doesn't rationality require that we consciously and deliberately make moral choices? Isn't it dangerous to act on habit, to leave moral decisions up to our subconscious, to our emotions? In fact, as we investigate the nature of moral habits, we will find very little tension between the principles of Objectivism and moral habits. Instead, what we will find is a powerful new tool to integrate into our daily lives.

Definition

So let's get started, in proper Objectivist fashion, with a definition.

What are habits? Habits are largely dominant and subconscious patterns of action established and maintained by repetition. Let me repeat that before we unpack it: Habits are largely dominant and subconscious patterns of action established and maintained by repetition.

So, habits are patterns of action, such as tying our shoes, with three distinguishing features: (1) dominance, (2) unconsciousness, and (3) repetition. (1) Dominance means that we perform the habitual actions the vast majority of the time. In almost every case that we pick up the ends of our shoelaces, we tie our shoes. (2) Subconsciousness means that we are not consciously choosing or

attending to the habitual actions. We don't have to think about each loop and pinch in order to tie our shoelaces. (3) That habits are established and maintained by repetition means that we automatize the actions by practicing them over and over again. We have all tied our shoes a billion and one times, so now we can do it in our sleep.

Moral habits share all of these features of ordinary habits, plus one more: moral habits arise out of a commitment to particular moral principles. We might adopt the moral habit of consciously setting aside time to rest and rejuvenate in order to achieve the value of being more productive while working. We might adopt the moral habit of being aware of our emotional states in order to achieve the value of greater clarity of thought. In other words, moral habits are habits which aim to achieve moral values.

So we know what habits are. And we know what moral habits are. But do we need them? And why?

The Function of Habits in Life

Yes, we do need habits. As Henry Maudsley, a contemporary of William James, said: If an act became no easier after being done several times, if the careful direction of consciousness were necessary to its accomplishment on each occasion, it is evident that the whole activity of a lifetime might be confined to one or two deeds -- that no progress could take place in development. A man might be occupied all day in dressing and undressing himself; [...] the washing of his hands or the fastening of a button would be as difficult to him on each occasion as to the child on its first trial. (Henry Maudsley, *Physiology of Mind*, 155; James, 114-5)

So, without habits, without the capacity to automatize frequently repeated actions, we could never move beyond the most simple of tasks. We would barely be able to walk, let alone perform amazing feats of multi-tasking, such as walking and chewing gum at the same time. Our conscious mind would be wholly engaged in tasks that, with habits, we relegate to the background.

But what about moral habits? Again, the exact same analysis applies. Imagine not being in the habit of honesty. Imagine having to consciously determine, with every new fact of which you became aware, whether to accept it or pretend that it isn't true. Imagine, in every sentence of every conversation, consciously deciding whether to tell the truth or to lie. You'd be thinking very little and speaking even less! Only through habit, only by automatizing these moral decisions -- so that we are always accepting facts and always telling the truth -- can we actually go about living our lives. Having no habits, making all moral decisions consciously and deliberately, is simply not an option.

Thus the question is not: Should I have habits? Our brains naturally form habits, whether we deliberately cultivate them or not. The real question is: Should I form habits consciously or unconsciously? Should I choose my own habits or have them chosen for me?

To show why consciously-cultivated habits are so worthwhile, let's take a peek at the three of benefits that well-developed and consciously-chosen moral habits bring us, namely (1) reduction of cognitive load, (2) the disposition to act morally, and (3) consistency between our words and our deeds.

Benefit #1: Moral habits reduce our cognitive load.

Moral habits automatize decisions for us, freeing us from the time and effort of deliberating most everyday moral choices. As I mentioned, without any such automatization, we would be mentally crippled. But more broadly speaking, our moral habits allow us to both focus our attention on the more interesting and complex aspects of life and act quickly.

For example, it is possible to decide on a case-by-case basis whether or not to pay our bill at a restaurant. We can, in fact, perform the rational calculus every time we are presented with a check. But why bother? You're always going to choose to pay the bill. Why not just pay on habit? Why waste our mental time and effort making a trivial moral choice when we could be contemplating our dinner partner's nose or the law of thermodynamics instead? By acting on habit, we allow our mind to focus on the important and interesting stuff of life.

At other times, we simply must make a decision quickly, lest the situation make a decision for us instead. For example, if we see a person leaving a store with stolen goods under their arm, there's no time to deliberate about whether to alert security or not. Unless we act immediately, the shoplifter will be long gone. Being in the habit of alerting the authorities to illegal activity allows us to act with due speed in such circumstances.

So, you can see that habits simplify our moral lives much like principles do. Our automatized moral principles spare us from explicitly deriving the principles relevant to a choice from the fundamental facts of human nature. We don't need to go through the "life is the standard" argument in order to decide whether to have beets or bok choy for dinner. Similarly, our moral habits spare us from explicitly choosing, on every occasion, to act in accordance with those principles. We can just allow our subconscious to make that trivial moral choice. So both moral habits and moral principles serve as shortcuts, leapfrogging us over already-known chains of reasoning, deliberation, and choice.

Benefit #2: Moral habits dispose us to act morally.

Good moral habits make virtuous action easy and natural, and render vice difficult and unpleasant. In forming habits, we condition our emotions to take pleasure in acting on principle and feel pain in acting against principle. That emotional feedback naturally inclines us towards the right thing to do.

For example, a student with a strong habit of self-discipline about schoolwork will take pleasure in the writing of a difficult term paper, even if she'd rather be goofing off, because she's proud of "getting the job done." Conversely, the pleasure of goofing off would be seriously diminished by an unfinished paper looming in the background. The habit of self-discipline helps the student look beyond the short-term pleasure of goofing off and the short-term pain of writing a paper. The habit aligns her emotions with her long-term self-interest.

The process by which moral habits tip emotions towards virtue and away from vice is not a mysterious one. It's a simply a form of conditioning. Let's suppose that I wish develop the habit of treating my co-workers with more respect. Every time I act in accordance with that principle (by listening attentively to their ideas, for example), I give myself a mental pat on the back. ("Good job, Diana!") But every time I fail to respect my co-workers (by interrupting them, for example), I give myself a mental slap on the wrist and decide what I should have done instead. ("Dammit, Diana, you should have heard them out!") Additionally, I'll get positive or negative feedback from my co-workers, depending upon my respect (or lack thereof) for them. In not too much time, my mind connects the emotions with the act. I no longer have to consciously reward or castigate myself, because the feeling of pride or of shame automatically arises. By programming my emotions, I have inclined myself towards acting on my principle of respecting my co-workers. I have formed a moral habit.

By rationally and consciously altering our emotions in such a fashion, we can safely let our actions be guided by them in our everyday lives. In doing so, we are not foregoing rationality in favor of emotionalism. We are not acting on whim. We have simply performed the rational

decision-making in advance. As Ayn Rand said, “all learning involves a process of automatization, i.e. of first acquiring knowledge by fully conscious, focused attention and observation, then of establishing mental connections which make that knowledge automatic..., thus freeing man’s mind to pursue further, more complex knowledge.” (IOE, 65). Habits work much the same way, simply in the realm of action rather than knowledge. Just as moral principles automatize moral knowledge, moral habits automatize moral actions.

Of course, moral habits do not force us to act in one way rather than another. They do not prevent us from engaging in rational deliberation when a complex or unusual situation arises. They do not prevent us from lying when the Nazi knocks on our door. They do not prevent us from being lazy or indulging in immediate (but ultimately harmful) pleasures. But they do offer emotional incentives and emotional impediments. And, as Aristotle said, “to feel delight and pain rightly or wrongly has no small effect on our actions.” (NE 1105a)

Benefit #3: Moral habits give us consistency between our words and our deeds.

Moral habits connect our abstract moral principles to the concrete moral choices we face every day. As such, habits strengthen the bond between what we say and what we do. They strengthen our integrity.

However, integrity concerns more than the “trickle-down” effect from our principles to our actions. It also concerns the “trickle-up” effect from our actions to our principles. To put it bluntly, what we do affects what we think. If our actions are inconsistent with our beliefs, we will change our beliefs in order to reconcile the two. How and why does this happen? The answer lies in a set of rather fascinating psychological studies, two of which we’ll discuss today.

First: Buyers of lottery tickets are much more confident of their chances to win just after purchasing their tickets than just before. In other words, the mere act of buying the lottery ticket changes the gambler’s beliefs about their odds. Why? According to psychologist Robert Cialdini, the better’s new-found optimism reflects “our nearly obsessive desire to be (and appear) consistent with what we have already done.” (Cialdini, 57) Wanting to be self-consistent above all else, the lotto players reconcile their risk of money on an arbitrary choice of numbers by, in essence, denying to themselves that their choice was arbitrary. What they did affected what they thought.

The second study was conducted in the mid-1960’s by two psychologists, Jonathan Freedman and Scott Fraser. In the control group, a “volunteer” went door-to-door, asking residents to display a large, poorly lettered sign reading “drive carefully” in front of their home. (The residents were shown a picture of the sign obscuring most of the view of an attractive house.) As we could have predicted, most refused: only 13 percent agreed to display the sign. However, in the experimental group, the same request yielded 76 percent compliance. Why? Because this experimental group had also agreed, two weeks earlier, to display a 3-inch sign that read, “be a safe driver.” In other words, Freedman and Fraser were able to increase their rate of compliance by a whopping 63 percent merely because of prior agreement to display the tiny sign. (Cialdini 72-3) Additionally, similar results were obtained in a later study where the experimental group was asked to sign a petition to “keep California beautiful” rather than display the small sign.

But why? Because what we do affects what we think. In choosing to display the small sign or sign the petition, the experimental group altered their self-image. They came to see themselves as “public spirited citizens who acted on civic principles.” (73) In keeping with that change in self-image, they agreed to display the large sign, something most of them wouldn’t have dreamed of doing just a few weeks earlier. (We can safely say that the people made a commitment to civic

virtue rather than driver safety because of the similar results achieved when initially asked to sign the petition.)

In everyday moral issues, this need for self-consistency most commonly manifests itself as rationalization. People rationalize their bad behavior by amending their moral principles just enough to give them a plausible excuse. A student who looked at his neighbor's paper during an exam might later "reconcile" this moral breach by deciding that it's okay to cheat when there's no time to study. An accountant who falsely tells clients that "the check is in the mail" might decide it's okay to lie on orders from the boss. In such cases, a small violation of a moral principle leads to a revision of the moral principle itself. The need for self-consistency, the need for integrity (whether genuine or not), is so strong that people are willing to move the line between right and wrong rather than admit wrongdoing. As a result, genuine integrity jumps right out the window.

Additionally, sometimes we rationalize for the sake of other people. We don't want to think of our parents, co-workers, spouses, and friends as bad people, so we excuse their immoral behavior by carving out an exception to our moral principles. In this case, we would rather move the line between right and wrong than face the unpleasantness of confronting the person or disassociating ourselves from them.

(Ayn Rand usually spoke of rationalization in terms of justifying philosophical views with emotion. Such a phenomena is not entirely different from the sort of rationalization we are talking of here, where guilt over the bad act results in an alteration of moral principles.)

Now, some of you might argue any Objectivist who understands the virtues of honesty and rationality wouldn't dream of rationalizing. However, Objectivism encourages rationalization by failing to even acknowledge the possibility of justified moral redemption after a wrongdoing. Sure there's the Wet Nurse, redeemed in his death in Hank's arms. But there's also John Galt, telling us to "make every allowance for errors of knowledge [but] not forgive or accept any breach of morality." (FNI, 179) One immoral action and you are lost to Satan. No amount of contrition, apology, amends, or future moral perfection can make you worthy of forgiveness in John Galt's eyes. Given that absurd standard, it's no wonder some Objectivists choose to rewrite their moral principles rather than admit they violated them.

So what can we do to guard against rationalization? How can we guard against both the small ethical lapses and the shifts in moral principle that can result? As you might have guessed, the answer is well-developed moral habits.

Moral habits prevent the small ethical lapses by using our emotions to incline us towards virtue. Fewer ethical lapses mean fewer temptations to rationalize. Additionally, if we do lapse, those emotions tell us, "Gack! Don't do that again!" The guilt and discomfort of immorality serve as a conservative force against the dreamy self-delusion of rationalization. To put it metaphorically, with well-developed moral habits, we cannot simply re-arrange the furniture of our mind to cover up the ethical stains on the rug.

There are also particular moral habits we can develop to help us come to terms with a bad deed without resorting to rationalization. We can be in the habit of making amends to injured parties. We can clearly admit our wrongdoing in a journal or to a trusted friend, so we have an objective record of our wrongdoing. We can imagine what we will do differently next time. Such habits serve as a coat of armor for our integrity against corrosive effects of rationalization.

(Of course, what we really need is a theory of redemption.)

So, looking back at these three major benefits of moral habits, namely (1) reduction of cognitive load, (2) the disposition to act morally, and (3) consistency between our words and our deeds, we can see how consciously developing good moral habits enrich and solidify our moral

lives. However, every silver lining has a cloud. We need to understand the limitations of moral habits in order to take full advantage of them.

The Hazards

The primary danger of habits is that we can become mired in them, stuck in old ways of acting that no longer serve our lives.

Sometimes, the circumstances of our lives change, rendering old habits at best useless and at worst dangerous. For example, diligent students used to “taking their work home” are in danger of meeting an early grave if they continue that habit in real jobs working 10 hour days. The solution to such outdated habits? We need to be alert to changes in our lives that require us to revise our habits. We need to be in the habit of attending to the feedback that our minds, bodies, and reality give us. We need to be in the habit of examining the rationality of our habits.

At other times, our habits might prevent us from investigating new and better ways of accomplishing certain tasks. My grandmother, for example, will not entertain the possibility of using e-mail, even though it would allow her to keep in better touch with her children. The solution to such outdated habits? We need to be in the habit of keeping our eyes and ears open to different ways of doing things. We need to be in the habit of exposing ourselves to new people and new ideas. We need to be in the habit of keeping up with the world, rather than insulating ourselves from it.

Of course, we may also encounter situations in which our deeply-engrained habits are temporarily dangerous. While vacationing in Mexico, you’d better keep your habit of drinking water from the tap under close watch. Navy men in the habit of swearing better take care not to ask their mothers to “pass the fucking potatoes” at the family dinner table.

These hazards of moral habits not particularly serious; they can all be overcome with due diligence. And again, I emphasize that the issue is not whether to have habits or not, but whether to create them consciously and deliberately or not.

Habits for Objectivist Virtues

Okay, so you’re sold on the idea that we ought to develop moral habits. But how do we decide which moral habits to cultivate? How can we determine which habits will help us better live the Objectivist virtues?

In my experience, two methods have proven particularly useful: (1) Nathaniel Branden’s sentence completion and (2) brainstorming with other people. Let’s take a look at each.

In *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, as well as other recent works, Nathaniel Branden uses programs of sentence completion to stimulate self-awareness and development. In these exercises, we quickly and repeatedly complete sentences such as “If I bring five percent more awareness to my emotions...” and “If I commit to dealing with people fairly and benevolently...” Using Branden’s own programs of sentence completion, as well as specialized sentence stems for Objectivist virtues, we will discover innumerable moral habits that will help us live better, happier lives.

Let’s complete a sentence particularly relevant to our time at this seminar: “If I bring five percent more rationality to my intellectual life...” If I bring five percent more rationality to my intellectual life...

- I will learn common fallacies.
- I will admit it when I don’t know the answer.
- I will understand an argument before I object to it.

- I will listen when others critique my arguments.
- I will finally read David Kelley's <I>The Art of Reasoning</I>.
- I will get more than four hours of sleep each night.

(Fat chance on that last one for many of you, I'm sure!) So, such sentence completion is, without a doubt, an effective tool for breaking our moral principles down into moral habits.

Another remarkably effective method of discovering good moral habits is brainstorming sessions with other Objectivists. After a preliminary version of this talk at the San Diego Ayn Rand Salon, we brainstormed habits for the major virtues. There were so many good habits presented for each virtue that we only managed to complete four of the virtues before we were kicked out of the library at closing time.

For example, we broke down productiveness, the virtue of taking responsibility for achieving our values, into the following habits:

- setting both long-term and short-term goals
- organizing our time well
- getting unpleasant tasks over with early on, rather than procrastinating
- rewarding ourselves for completing unpleasant tasks
- breaking up large tasks into smaller milestones
- getting adequate sleep
- taking time off from work to rejuvenate
- studying how to complete a goal before the work begins
- knowing the limits of our knowledge and capacities
- being realistic in our expectations of ourselves and others
- choosing a career that we enjoy
- taking pleasure in both the experience of working towards a goal and the accomplishment of it
- taking on new and exciting challenges

The list just keeps going.

Those of you interested in participating in such a brainstorming session are invited to my participant-sponsored session tomorrow at 7 pm.

These particular habits of rationality and productiveness illustrate just how well moral habits help us to concretize Objectivist virtues. By thinking of virtues in terms of habits, those virtues take on a real and particular meaning in our lives. Using habits, we can set ourselves on a clear path of moral self-improvement. We've often heard, particularly from those new to Objectivism, the difficulties of translating Objectivist principles into real life. That moral habits concretize the virtues greatly helps in this process of translation from abstract to particular.

Virtue, Character, and Habits

The last two issues of discussion here today, moral character and the problem of the prudent predator, I will only briefly touch upon due to time constraints. But I invite you to raise questions in the Q&A or later in the week if you're interested in further discussion.

Lately, there has been a movement afoot in Objectivism to incorporate a conception of moral character into Rand's ethics. Part of that movement has involved a shift in the definition of virtue. As you know, Rand defined the virtues as "recognitions" of certain facts. For example, productiveness is "the recognition of the fact that productive work is the process by which man's mind sustains his life." (VOS, 28) The virtue of productiveness is thus mostly concerned with recognizing the value of productive work, rather than actually productively working! Moving away

from Rand, David Kelley and others have begun to define virtues as commitments to acting according to our moral knowledge. Virtue is thus more than a mental act of recognition; it explicitly requires both awareness and action. We're doing the right things for the right reasons.

Moral character similarly requires both awareness and action. It requires automatized knowledge of our values and principles. It requires automatized action in congruence with those values and principles. Our characters are the sum of what we think and what we do that is so ingrained in our subconscious, so a part of who we are, that we would not consider doing or thinking otherwise. Thus the automatized actions of well-developed moral habits are an integral part of good moral character.

Specifically, habits shore up our moral character by helping us overcome weakness of will. Sometimes we are presented with extraordinarily tempting choices. The immediate pleasure to be gained overwhelms us, whether from booze, gambling, jelly beans, or loose men. But strongly engrained moral habits remind us of the emotional hangover to come. They help forestall even the thought of such temptations.

Much more, of course, could be said about character. But for the moment, we need to move on to the problem of the prudent predator.

The Problem of the Prudent Predator

The real question of the prudent predator is: Why shouldn't you act against principle in a particular instance when you would greatly benefit from it? For example, why shouldn't you embezzle money from your employer? Why shouldn't you lie to cover up marital infidelity? Why shouldn't you plagiarize a paper from the internet? After all, free money, preserving a marriage, and good grades are all values. If you can be reasonably certain that you won't get caught, why not go for it?

Ayn Rand's answer to this question (at least as explicated by Peikoff) is that the gains from such activities are not, in fact, values at all. Money, marriage, and good grades are only values with our moral principles intact. In Peikoff's words, "the integrity of man's consciousness, its principled harmony with existence, is the precondition of man's benefiting from any of the splendor that the world holds out to him." (OPAR, 273)

In some sense, Rand and Peikoff have a point; we can't assign value to something independent of the means by which we acquire it. However, their answer doesn't explain why predation does such harm to our integrity. And, frankly, to claim that the stuff acquired by predation has no value is far-fetched at best, incomprehensible at worst. Do people without integrity, in fact, have no values? Doesn't a Big Mac help Bill Clinton survive? Isn't it a value at all?

However, moral habits can come to our rescue in answering the prudent predator. Knowing how moral habits function in our lives, we can safely say that the potential damage to ourselves brought on by even occasionally violating our moral principles is not worth the potential benefit. We know that indulging in immorality weakens our moral principles through rationalization. We know that, without a process of atonement for a violation of our ethical principles, we will change those principles to put ourselves in a better light.

So the prudent predator, in predating, risks losing the very principles that are necessary for him live and live well in almost all circumstances. He endangers his only long-term means of achieving his values and supporting his life: his principles. In other words, the prudent predator example presumes that people can occasionally violate their moral principles without any harmful side-effects to those principles. But we know that isn't true. We know that the prudent predator is

at grave risk of destroying his principles all together by occasionally violating them. And that is why prudent predation is not at prudent as it seems from first glance.

Conclusion

I'd like to end my lecture today with a fun story. As many of you know, my husband Paul and I got married a bit over a year ago. In the first few months of marriage, my mother repeatedly reminded me: "Remember Diana, how you do things in the first six months of marriage is how you'll be doing them for the next 30 years!" Yikes! No foot rubs for him every night after work!

See, my husband and I were forming habits like crazy in those first few months of marriage. And unless we paid attention to that process, we were likely to get stuck with chores that we resented the other for. And that, of course, is bad for a marriage.

The principle embodied in my mother's advice extends well beyond marriage. We form habits no matter what, particularly when we make major life changes. And if we don't form those habits ourselves, with conscious intent, then they will be formed by the people and events around us. So if you remember one thing from this last hour, remember this: form your own habits, or they will form you!

Thank you.