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BENJAMIN'S HABITS AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION

"Even the distracted person can form habits [Gewöhnungen]."¹ This contention expresses Walter Benjamin's attempt to theorize human action within the constraints of modern life. Implicit in the statement is a premodern background in which habits, not distraction, serve as a basis for a model of action. Considering how to convert the distraction of modern experience into productive action, Benjamin turns to traditions of habit.

The essay where this statement appears, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility," is best known for its account of how new technologies like photography transform the "aura" of artworks. But what also animates Benjamin's account is the pursuit of politically meaningful ideas of action, particularly collective action. This is where the statement about habits comes in. If the distractions of modern technologies and social realities limit conscious thought and patterns of life, perhaps they can also provide new kinds of attention and activity. Benjamin's concern to find potential for cultivating habits among distracted people fits within the larger project of recognizing tradition in modernity, and together, these two projects provide suggestive models for the study of religious thought and practice.

My goal here is to elaborate this brief mention of habits into the larger context of Benjamin's approach to religious tradition, particularly religious action. Habits and the related idea of habitus (from Pierre Bourdieu) focus this discussion in an effort to consider how Benjamin's conception of habit may contribute to the study of religion in dialogue with conceptual and methodological conversations on spiritual exercises, habits and habitus, religious agency, and the question of secularity and religion.

Spiritual Exercises

The growing literature on "spiritual exercises" draws from studies of late antique religious and philosophical history, particularly in the work of Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault, and Arnold Davidson. The habits associated with spiritual exercises may be associated with a form of life or habitus, terms from the work of Giorgio Agamben and Pierre Bourdieu, respectively. From habit and habitus, then, we engage a third conversation on religion and secular modernity. My argument is that Walter Benjamin's work, though unsystematic, offers ways into these three conversations and the connections among them. His recognition of tradition as a source of

¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 3: 1935-1938* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 120. Hereinafter cited in the text as "Work of Art." Thanks to Lucy Britt for comments on this paper.

habits, which in turn are necessary to models of collective political action, frames the challenge of engaging modernity with tradition.

For Pierre Hadot, the notion of “spiritual exercises” in ancient philosophy demonstrates how theory always involves practice. Every school of thought, he argues, “practices exercises designed to ensure spiritual progress toward the ideal state of wisdom, exercises of wisdom that will be, for the soul, analogous to the athlete’s training or to the application of a medical cure.”² By attending to the disciplines of study, recitation, meditation, and personal cultivation central to ancient schools of philosophy, Hadot uncovers the kinds of habits that historically have been associated with social groups and ways of life.

For professional philosophers who had almost completely turned their attention to theory and cognition, Hadot’s attention to action opened significant lines of inquiry beyond the study of ancient philosophy. As Arnold Davidson shows, Hadot’s general view of philosophy as an “art of life” influenced Foucault’s late work on sexuality and the care of the self: “Foucault’s aim is to link the practices of the self exhibited in the domain of sexual behavior to the spiritual training and exercise that govern the whole of one’s existence.”³ Because Foucault’s work has been so influential beyond the particular historical and cultural contexts it addressed, his engagement with Hadot’s work has contributed to many theoretical discussions of religion and the elevation of religious action to a major category of social and cultural thought.

Among contemporary thinkers whose work reflects this “religious turn” are Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, and Talal Asad. All of these thinkers also engage closely with the work of Walter Benjamin, and here I limit my attention to one remark by Asad on the role of religion in Benjamin’s thinking about action: “I am deeply impressed by Benjamin’s resort to theology as a kind of practical knowledge in which ethical and political dimensions of thought and action are illuminated.”⁴ Just as Hadot challenged notions of ancient philosophy as purely theoretical and cognitive by demonstrating how schools of philosophy represented ways of life that included spiritual exercises, Asad suggests here that Benjamin likewise found theology to be a source of practices and a form of life.

Though he does not develop this observation, Asad may be thinking of a text like the 1921 fragment “Capitalism as Religion,” in which Benjamin states, “Capitalism is a purely cultic religion, perhaps the most extreme that ever existed.”⁵ The cult of capitalism is absolute and completely devoid of theology, and unlike other cults, it “creates guilt, not atonement.”⁶ In a point that builds directly on Weber, Benjamin asserts that the cult of

² Pierre Hadot, “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,” trans. Arnold Davidson and Paula Wissing, *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990): 494 [483-505].

³ Arnold Davidson, “Spiritual Exercises and Ancient Philosophy: An Introduction to Pierre Hadot,” *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990): 480 [475-482].

⁴ Talal Asad and Basit Kareem Iqbal, “Thinking about Method: A Conversation with Talal Asad,” *Qui parle* 26 (2017): 212 [195-218].

⁵ Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 1: 1913-1926* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 288.

⁶ Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” 288.

capitalism "has developed as a parasite of Christianity in the West...until it reached the point where Christianity's history is essentially that of its parasite—that is to say, of capitalism."⁷ This point about history should not be overlooked, as it anticipates the concern in Benjamin's late work for history-writing. Seen through the lens of capitalism, Christianity becomes a tradition whose progress culminates in capitalism and makes sense only through that lens.

It is important to note the distinction between religious action and religious experience for Benjamin. Against Martin Buber's cultivation of religious experience through the revival of Jewish tradition, an example of a school of thought known as *Lebensphilosophie*, Benjamin skeptically told his friend Scholem "that if I should run into Buber I should hand him a barrel of tears in our names. . . . He said derisively that if Buber had his way, first of all one would have to ask every Jew, 'Have you experienced Jewishness yet?'"⁸ Religious action and experience are linked for Benjamin, but he rejects the immediate and automatic connection between them.

Habits, Tradition, and Modernity

Benjamin's "Capitalism as Religion" offers no details on the practices and habits cultivated by the cult of capitalism, apart from the idea of a "comparison between the images of the saints of the various religions and the banknotes of different states."⁹ But in his affirmation of cultic practice over theology, Benjamin opens a space for reflection on the place of spiritual exercises in religious traditions. As it turns out, this interest in religious practice resurfaces in some of his travel writings, to which I turn next. What is striking about these examples is not only their shared connection to Catholic traditions in southern Italy, but also an implicit connection between Benjamin's acts of observation and the religious actions he observes. Consider this description of the Italian village of Atrani:

The gently rising, curved baroque staircase leading to the church. The railing behind the church. The litanies of the old women at the "Ave Maria": preparing to die first-class. If you turn around, the church verges like God himself on the sea. Each morning the Christian era crumbles the rock, but between the walls below, the night falls always into the four old Roman quarters. Alleyways like air shafts. A well in the marketplace. In the late afternoon, women around it. Then, in solitude: archaic plashing.¹⁰

What ties this passage together are the women who chant the "Ave Maria" and then appear at the well later in the afternoon. The sights and sounds of the description come from human and natural sources and move through space up to the church and down to the sea, and through time, from the present to the future ("preparing to die") and from day and night to centuries of history ("Christian era," "Roman quarters"). The habits and rhythms of daily and historical life in Atrani appear through the author's habits of observation. More literary than "scientific," these observations

⁷ Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," 289.

⁸ Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), 29.

⁹ Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," 290.

¹⁰ Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, in *Selected Writings*, 1, 470.

nonetheless require disciplined habits in understanding history, religion, architecture, and descriptive writing.

Habits of observation may capture the affective experience of a place along with its sights and sounds. Benjamin's essay on Naples expresses the humor of local religious culture: "Some years ago a priest was drawn on a cart through the streets of Naples for indecent offenses. He was followed by a crowd hurling maledictions. At a corner a wedding procession appeared. The priest stands up and makes the sign of a blessing, and the cart's pursuers fall on their knees."¹¹ The essay portrays the religiosity of Naples as a place where holy festivals blend with daily life just as public spaces mix with private homes: "Irresistibly the festival penetrates each and every working day. Porosity is the inexhaustible law of the life of this city, reappearing everywhere. A grain of Sunday is hidden in each weekday, and how much weekday in this Sunday!"¹² The porous volcanic stone of the city's buildings provides a conceit for the blurring of sacred and secular, traditional and modern.

The habits of observation Benjamin cultivates in his writing become explicit in the 1936 version of "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility": "Tactile reception comes about not so much by way of attention as by way of habit. The latter largely determines even the optical reception of architecture, which spontaneously takes the form of casual noticing rather than attentive observation" ("Work of Art," 120). Perception of new forms, says Benjamin, has more to do with distraction than its antithesis, concentration, an observation that applies to architecture as well as to new forms of art, like film. Architecture is "received in a state of distraction and through the collective" ("Work of Art," 119-120).

Far from a liability to collective perception and experience, distraction and habit combine here to construct "a covert measure of the extent to which it has become possible to perform new tasks of apperception," and new forms of art like film will then "tackle the most difficult and most important tasks wherever it is able to mobilize the masses" ("Work of Art," 120). With this move, Benjamin attempts to overcome binary distinctions between active concentration and distraction, intentional and habitual acts, in order to sketch a new way of understanding political action.

Benjamin's notion of distracted action also links tradition to modernity. Through casual, distracted acts of perception, mass audiences of film develop habits of perception that contain political potential and belong to the ancient tradition of aesthetics that includes architecture. Though Benjamin never articulates how these habits work or precisely what they represent, they directly involve the problem of political agency in the face of fascism, which is where his essay goes from this point to its conclusion, where the fascist aestheticization of politics leads to the glorification of war ("Work of Art," 122). Benjamin's wager that film reception contains political potential is audacious, but its key insight is the collective, social context of this new medium and its link to ancient aesthetic traditions.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, "Naples," in Benjamin, *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1986), 163 [163-173].

¹² Benjamin and Lacis, "Naples," 168.

In Eli Friedlander's reading of the "Work of Art" essay, habit plays a crucial and original role in the experience of film. According to Friedlander, "It is by taking itself to be primarily concerned with ordinary experience that film makes habits become touchstones for appreciation"; he then claims that habits are "unavailable to consciousness, and their transformation is opened for all, collectively, in film."¹³ While Friedlander recognizes the place of habit in Benjamin's analysis of architecture and film, it is not clear why he considers habit to be unavailable to consciousness. Indeed, Benjamin seeks to mobilize the perceptual habits gained through distraction for critical, political action: "It [film reception] makes cult value recede into the background, not only because, at the movies, the evaluating attitude requires no attention. The audience is an examiner, but a distracted one" ("Work of Art," 269).

To be sure, the distracted audience is not the same as the critic who describes and evaluates works in detail, but Benjamin's appeal to habit here does not rule out conscious, critical thought and action. Just as Hadot complicates the boundary between thought and action in philosophy, Benjamin resists the sharp distinction between conscious and unconscious reception of art. Of course, this resistance does not guarantee that a distracted mass audience will overthrow fascism or even provide an account of how that could happen. But it does complicate the question of aesthetic and political agency in a way that has implications for the study of religion as well.

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus frames the problem of action broadly within social and political contexts. For Bourdieu, habitus provides an understanding of how to preserve social order, balancing stability with change. Habitus encompasses far more than ordinary ideas of habit as the "generative principle of regulated improvisations" that supports "the coordination of practices" as well as the "practices of coordination."¹⁴ Bourdieu's notion of habitus extends beyond habit, but like Benjamin's mentions of habit, it balances conscious action (practices of coordination) with systems (coordination of practices) that go beyond individual activity. Like the case of architecture in Benjamin, habitus pervades and shapes human spaces and experiences, but it also affords conscious activity and political agency. As I have argued elsewhere, I believe one of the main sources of this dialectic of agency and environment is religious tradition.¹⁵

Benjamin's interest in finding political potential in the reception of film led him to consider the place of habit and distraction in collective experience. But while this kind of habit seems not to include critical thought, another passage on habit, from *One-Way Street*, where the text on Atraní also appears, distinguishes the work of habit from immediate impressions:

What makes the very first glimpse of a village, a town, in the landscape so incomparable and irretrievable is the rigorous connection between foreground and distance. Habit has not yet done its work. As soon as we begin to find our bearings, the landscape

¹³ Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 180.

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78, 81.

¹⁵ Britt, *Postsecular Benjamin: Agency and Tradition* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

vanishes at a stroke, like the façade of a house as we enter it. It has not yet gained preponderance through a constant exploration that has become habit. Once we begin to find our way about, that earliest picture can never be restored.¹⁶

Like the shock of modernity, the first glimpse of a landscape grabs the viewer with a fleeting impression, followed by the perspective afforded by habit, informed by the past. This kind of skillful perception takes on literally messianic dimensions in Benjamin's 1940 "On the Concept of History," in which the angel of history, illustrated by Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (a title that combines tradition with modernity), witnesses the wreckage of history as the storm called progress blows its wings into the future. As the wide eyes of the angel gaze into the past, they meet the eyes of the spectator, the viewer of Klee's picture. Helpless to stop the storm of progress, the eyes of the angel bear witness to the catastrophe and point it out by meeting the viewer's gaze.¹⁷

Benjamin's texts on a village landscape and the angel of history train the viewer's gaze, cultivating habits of seeing that discern the present scene in the context of the past and future. It is tempting to follow many of Benjamin's admirers into the domain of messianic theology with a passage like this—Gershom Scholem, Giorgio Agamben, and Gillian Rose are three prominent examples—but another way to read these texts is to recognize their practical, pedagogical aims of thinking about seeing and cultivating habits of discernment that connect careful observation with historical analysis.¹⁸ The work of developing analytical habits, which Benjamin practices but admittedly rarely describes, situates his work less in the domain of far-flung messianic speculation than in the realm of aesthetic and political cultivation he claimed as a student and essayist.

The passages from Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay and *One-Way Street* capture the paradoxical nature of habit as active cultivation and practice on the one hand and non-conscious ("habituated") action on the other. In the "Work of Art" essay, old habits going back to ancient architecture provide the basis for new habits of film reception. The power of these habits derives not only from collective experience but also from their political potential. Habits do not require our full attention—they function in the state of distraction Benjamin recognizes in the consumption of mass media like film, or in the way a first perception of scenery transforms into a recognizable landscape. Collective aesthetic experiences of architecture or film emerge from cultural traditions and suggest the possibility of a new kind of political agency that depends less on conscious effort or education than on habits that operate even in a state of distraction.

In order to yield meaningful agency, such habits must open up new ways of acting and change. A model for this sort of agency appears in a discussion

¹⁶ Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, 470.

¹⁷ A fuller development of seeing and agency in this text appears in *Postsecular Benjamin*, 142-153.

¹⁸ See Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*; Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Gillian Rose, "Walter Benjamin—Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism," in *Judaism and Modernity* (London: Blackwell, 1993), 175-210.

of how habits enable us to learn new skills in Howard Margolis's study of science and behavior, *Paradigms and Barriers*.¹⁹ Even though writing on a chalkboard requires different actions and muscles from writing on paper, most of us are able to manage this task the first time we try it. A set of habits from one domain allows seemingly effortless learning in another. The shift from writing on paper to writing on a chalkboard may take place in a state of distraction, without any concentrated effort on how the transfer is possible.

What the chalkboard example opens is a broadened conception of habit that avoids the division into conscious and unconscious action. Like the notion of habit I derive from Benjamin, this conception recognizes the complexity and absolute necessity of habit to human life. The combination of cognitive and motor abilities in this notion of habit, which coordinate without our full awareness, has potential for the study of religious change. For if habit combines cognitive features that allow us to shift from one kind of action to another seemingly without effort, then habit becomes a mechanism for any number of adaptations and changes in religious practice not captured by such historical categories as persecution, reformation, and enlightenment, or socio-cultural categories like syncretism and cultural diffusion.

If habit straddles the boundary of concentration and distraction, conscious and rote behavior, then it has far-reaching implications not just for the study of religion but for ethics and human nature in general. For Aristotle, habit is a crucial component of ethical action; and for C.S. Peirce, habit provides a model of human action that can solve problems of disposition and the relationship of mind to body. For Aristotle, virtue "is formed by habit, *ethos*, and its name, *ethike*, is therefore derived, by a slight variation, from *ethos*."²⁰ By way of analogies to skills in building houses and playing music, Aristotle notes that the virtues are acquired by doing virtuous actions, and that the habits necessary to acquiring virtues must be inculcated over time, from an early age.²¹ For Peirce, habit provides a way to understand actions in relation to thought, and awareness in relation to unconscious behavior. Peirce defines belief, for example, as "a habit of mind essentially enduring for some time, and mostly (at least) unconscious; and like other habits, it is . . . perfectly self-satisfied."²² Doubt, on the other hand, is the "privation of a habit."²³ For Aristotle and for Peirce, habit regulates action and serves to connect or ambiguete the boundary between intentional and unintentional, conscious and unconscious, activity. These conceptions of habit align well with discussions of "spiritual exercises," everyday life, and lived religion.

Talal Asad's remark on "theology as a kind of practical knowledge," quoted above, points away from most discussions of Benjamin and theology, which are almost entirely theoretical, toward a discussion of practical, political

¹⁹Howard Margolis, *Paradigms and Barriers: How Habits of Mind Govern Scientific Beliefs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 9-13.

²⁰Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 33.

²¹Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 34-35.

²²Peirce, "The Essentials of Pragmatism," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1955), 257.

²³Peirce, "The Essentials of Pragmatism," 257.

action.²⁴ Along with his well-known interest in Jewish thought, Benjamin cultivated a lifelong and thorough engagement with Christian theology. Not only were Benjamin's interests with Christian theology longstanding and far deeper than typically recognized, but they were often practical as well, with strong ethical and political commitments. His friendships with theologians Florens Christian Rang, Fritz Lieb, and Karl Thieme, for instance, led to publications that confronted German nationalist and fascist ideology. Benjamin contributed to Rang's anti-nationalist *Deutsche Bauhütte* (1924),²⁵ in spite of his reluctance to engage so directly in a political project of that type, and he published "The Storyteller" in Lieb's anti-fascist journal *Orient and Occident* (1936).²⁶ Like Benjamin, these theologians opposed German nationalism and fascism through sustained engagements with German thought and literature.

Asad's mention of Benjamin's engagement with theology also suggests their shared interests in secularism and modernity. As one of the most original theorists of postsecular theory, Asad has brought anthropological insights to bear on the hidden ways in which modern thought defines and implements categories of religion and secularity. Like Benjamin, Asad doubts the self-evidence of these categories and critically pursues how they deploy systems of power. Benjamin's analyses of modernism in the "Work of Art" essay and elsewhere, notably his essay on surrealism and his studies of Baudelaire and the Paris Arcades, persistently situate modernism in the context of traditions and "secular" forms of religious terms.

Conclusion

Given how theoretical (and secular) most scholarship on Benjamin has been, it is not surprising that his few mentions of habit have drawn little attention. While these mentions of habit are few and sketchy, Benjamin's lifelong inquiries about experience, from his student days through the Arcades Project, reveal sustained interest in the domain of action as habit. And though it is easy to mistake Benjamin's interests in modern culture for an endorsement of modernist and secularist thought, every one of his engagements with modernism draws from premodern culture—from the ancient past of classical architecture in the "Work of Art" essay to the references to premodern Christianity in "Capitalism as Religion" and the travel writings.

So is habit an overlooked category in the study of religion? Does it solve the problem of political agency and human action as Benjamin implies? If the distractions of modern life preclude some activities, then certain habits, rooted in premodern life, might enable others. And if habits bridge mind and body, conscious and unconscious activity, they surely play a role in the study of ethics, as Aristotle recognized. But the question of ethics immediately raises the question of bad habits as well, casting doubt on Benjamin's apparent haste to trust habits to yield good politics. Still, the

²⁴ See, for instance, the essays in *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, Colby Dickinson and Stéphane Symons, eds. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

²⁵ Florens Christian Rang et al., *Deutsche Bauhütte: Ein Wort an Uns Deutsche Über Mögliche Gerechtigkeit Gegen Belgien und Frankreich und zur Philosophie der Politik*, ed. Uwe Steiner (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2015).

²⁶ *Selected Writings* 3: 143-166.

category of habit does seem to deserve more discussion in theoretical and empirical studies of religion, particularly around questions of postsecularity, agency, and tradition.

A further methodological note follows from this discussion. The little-discussed engagement with religious practices in Benjamin's work suggests connections to current studies of "lived religion," a topic I pursue at greater length in a study of religion around Benjamin's work.²⁷ Lived religion refers not just to the sum of such ordinary practices but to a holistic frame that, according to Robert Orsi, understands "history and culture not as something that religious persons are 'in' but as the media through which they fundamentally are, and that also understands the power of cultural structures and inherited idioms—that Pierre Bourdieu has named the 'habitus'—both to shape and discipline thought and as well to give rise to religious creativity and improvisation."²⁸ What Benjamin's work may contribute to that discussion, among other things, is (1) critical scrutiny of "religion" within the complexity of "secular" modern culture, along with (2) careful investigation of habit and habitus as categories for understanding lived religion. By drawing attention to Benjamin's interest in habit as a source of collective experience and potential change, as well as his troubling boundaries between religious and secular culture, a discussion of Benjamin and lived religion could deepen and complicate understandings of lived religion as a growing area of study.

²⁷ *Religion Around Walter Benjamin*, in process.

²⁸ Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in *Lived Religion in America*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 16 [3-21].