

The formation of habits – the formation of reflexes

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Abstract: Man lives in a present time of action, and in an “**affective present**”. In the case of the **affective present**, the current emotional state—i.e. **mood**—cannot be detached from the legacy of the past and from the future expectancy. The degree to which the two projective times influence the pragmatics of the present will be pointed out when analyzing (*Inconsistency of time*).

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The situation reflex

Concerning one’s heritage: the reactions of one’s **mood** represent one’s responses to a known (heritage) situation. The **situation reflex** comes in response to a labyrinthine echo, to an entire chain of successive emotional experiences, known as the **long catenary reflex**.

Based on Behterev’s and Secenov’s observations, Pavlov’s conditioned reflex seems to be the first systematic survey of the **situation reflex**. Man’s entire life experience—from the most elementary form of learning—is based on this parameter. Conditioned reflexes are born to almost every concrete situation in our daily lives, *provided it has an impact on us*.

The impact condition is compulsory: if we know that, in the street, all young persons who wear a violet leather jacket represent a danger, a state of alert sets in each time we encounter such a person, while other youngsters wearing a leather jacket of any other color trigger no reaction. Back home, at dinner, we will be able to relate, in a voice betraying our fright, that that day we had had the tough luck to bump into three young persons wearing violet leather jackets. But we won’t be able to recall how many youngsters wearing leather jackets of other colors we had met only a few hours before. The **situation reflex**

represents a response to a recollection: the remembrance of an emotional experience or of a piece of information (conscious or not; how conscious the information or the emotional experience can be will be discussed later on.)

Since recollections that trigger reflexes (on both the level of consciousness and that of unconsciousness) are numerous, permanent **selector systems** have been built up against the huge amount of bombarding stimuli. The **filtering** intensity of the two selectors also depends on the results provided by the other parameters: we do not always react with the same intensity to the same stimulus; or, various persons react differently to the same danger; or, one person may be delighted by, while another remains totally indifferent to, a sign of good omen.

How extremely complex **mood**—as it results from the interaction of an enormous number of factors—is, is also highlighted by the fact that every single second, **situation reflex** alone (a mere parameter), is subjected to the influence of a considerable number of stimuli. Everything that surrounds us and is received (perceived or not) by our senses (no matter by which), can induce a response from our selector system. The table I'm writing on, the light that comes through the curtain, the lamp on my table, the telephone, the street's noises, my tobacco's smell (itself not constantly the same), the hardness of the pen my fingers are holding tight—they are all alive in my mind, and they come in touch with an incident that I have experienced myself or learned from others. (It is, in fact, a sum of the sums; establishing each “plus” and each “minus” is no easy job, though.)

The sum total that results—in the form of a tendency towards a state of alert or of comfort, towards euphoria or apathy, etc.—represents the contribution of the **situation reflex** to **mood**.

When a stimulus awakens an exceptionally strong response (either conscious or unconscious, but not **terrorizing**), it generates an attitude which, even if not necessarily explicit in manifestation, can turn into a **fetish** or, respectively, a **taboo**. In that case, even without becoming aware of the reflex, we will react, incidentally, in a totally negative or a totally positive way to one of the numerous stimuli, bestowing upon it a larger ratio of the resulted sum. A particular ballpoint pen, a specific music, a certain sip of coffee. If there is no direct threat, certain stimuli will be automatically discarded in an act of defense against them, certain gestures will be spared.

How far investigations can go is a technical issue. It is obvious that, to make an objective appreciation (of all the stimuli that have reached the moment's consciousness and subconsciousness), we need *landmarks*. But landmarks are visible only when the respective stimuli have a **terrorizing** manifestation, eliminating—for the duration of the analysis—all the other stimuli. This does not happen during the long "ordinary times" and, by bulldozing the isolation of the constitutive elements, we disrupt the existing harmony. (Again, having reached a point of disharmonic state, we move away from the goal of our investigation). Hence results the quasi-impossibility—for the present time, at least—of experimental investigations. But in an already predictable future—and having the necessary technical equipment—it is imaginable that such calculations will be possible to make.

Our present inability to analyze the set of terms in their relations with these *landmarks* confers a speculative character to this chapter, too.

However, possible applications are easy to discern. For example, **education**: factors, such as experience, discipline, the hardships of life, frequently oblige the individual to embrace a selective conduct with respect to the instant's stimuli. **Education** itself imposes a certain **mood** and, respectively, a certain kind of **behavior**. In this case, again—as always—our response follows the pattern imposed by our *relationship with eternity*, by our *need for safety*, and by *sex*. **Education** and self-imposed constraints may influence the *filters*, on condition these constraints follow a code accepted by the convictions that are thus born and activated. Volition, attention, memory, etc., play their own part. At the same time, countless stimuli keep bombarding us non-stop. Only, they are "translated" into a "language that we have learned" and that we are trying hard to "speak".

The long catenary reflex

The **situation reflex** is just a partial result, because situation itself represents a consequence of something.

With the exception of the **terrorizing elements**, which can eclipse the entire background, no concrete situation can disregard the "roots". In the long stretches of "ordinary" time, the patch of ground under our feet stands on numerous layers of successive civilizations, to which we have reacted till we have classified them.

The act of classifying—or "getting used to"—something translates as a passive or stereotype attitude towards a certain stimulus. Unlike the immediate consequences resulting from the occurrence of a **terrorizing moment**, classification is achieved smoothly. And yet, there are also layers which are harder to tamp, and which are therefore likely to trigger a response every time they are touched. To simplify things, here is an

example: getting into a train compartment, I remember—consciously or unconsciously—a specific smell, as well as a situation that reminds me of that smell; I remember the kid who, on my last journey, was raising such hell with its cries; I remember a funny reply the kid gave; and so on, until I get to a recollection that gives me pleasure (or causes me obvious displeasure). Why does this happen? We are now getting to one of the fundamental questions raised in the introductory part: why, all considered, today I am preparing myself emotionally for a pleasant journey, and tomorrow, apparently under the same circumstances, the same perspective gives me such obvious state of discomfort. My recollection does not necessarily become conscious; but it may be so very strong as to become a significant term in the sum total of my **mood's** moment. In a train carriage that has lots of empty seats, I'll choose, "at random", a seat according to criteria that depend on these factors.

If the great majority of these successive layers of memories are taken over without any present contribution and with no perceivable reaction, building up a background for what we generally call "habit", it is still possible that these reminiscences should follow one another in such a way that the reflex to the long catena becomes obvious only for a past moment. But just as in a kaleidoscope, the layers may settle in various positions. Here interferes, and hence results, the so-called "originality" of the individual, capable—through the connections he makes—to react to the stimuli in his personal way.

Connections are countless in number, and every stimulus can reactivate other and other emotional states. Sometimes, the correlations seem random, but a strong response to a past situation may gain predominance. This **long** (sometimes very long) **catenary reaction** can explain our "unpredictable", "out of the ordinary", reactions; so long sometimes that they manage to reactivate (and revive) some forgotten **terrorizing moment** (Psychoanalysts focus precisely on such moments in the subject's past, with the help of which they try to explain and alleviate a present emotional state. At first a **mood**, later on an entire **behavior**).

*We must not forget that a stimulus that exerts its action upon an organ of sensory perception reconnects entire long-forgotten situations, and other non-excited sensors may also re-enter the circuit. Responses are never merely to the present stimulus—except when that stimulus is a **terrorizing element**.*

Afferent impulses become "**terrorizing**" when they come in touch with one of the primordial terms—attitude towards God, sex, and survival (i.e. divinity, sex, and sense of safety). Fear, one's tendency for self-

assertion, the desire to complete one's "collection", libido, gregariousness, a ludic sense, etc., reduce the instant to a primordial element. Abyssal psychology, usually (depending on author) reduces the instant's mobile to predominance of a single factor of this kind. This way, it ignores the apparently random way by which the connections are made, as well as the fact that the reflex has such long catenæ that no one can predict where its **explorations** will end.

Today, the computer—in its competition with the human brain—still makes many "useless", even illogical, connections for a given task. But we must not forget that the **time factor** plays an important part in man's act of selection. As the time fraction is limited, in-depth **explorations** for **long catenary reflexes** also stop—invariably—at a certain level. If they do not encounter a relevant layer during this "**respite allowed**", a new stimulus, subsequent to the previous one, will make it necessary to recommence the act of rummaging in memory's storerooms. Practically, the **long catenary reflex** does not have the physical ability to get "to the end"; under the pressure of new stimuli that require new explorations, it will stop at encountering either a **terrorizing layer**, or an **intermediate** one.

Nor should we discard, with the usual haughtiness, the theories of return to a state of intrauterine comfort (?), or to the safety of the maternal womb (even though they have given rise to countless intentional or non-intentional caricatures). Because that is where the long catenæ of the situation reflex would eventually take us if they had the time required, and if they did not have to cross through so many **terrorizing layers**. Which would eliminate the individual's evolution, in the sense of accumulating new sensations and, through them, new experiences, each of them a preserver of traces.

The main problem **explorations** have to face is the **time factor**. By continuously bringing in new and new hordes of stimuli, it prevents any continued analysis of a certain moment's emotional state. Psychoanalysts are trying to solve the problem by creating the longest possible instant—an instant unspoiled by succession—by the general procedures and rules of psychoanalytic practice, i.e. by inducing a partial or full hypnotic state, thus temporarily sparing the subject of other stimuli.

Apart from all this, the affective deployment of the moment also involves a variety of interferences, which the individual perceives consciously or unconsciously. To illustrate the multitude of unpredictable

influences that are continuously hovering about the subject, “*ditention*” [1] is perhaps the best example [2].

The repeatability—indeed, never perfectly identical—of various emotional experiences leads to reactions that are similar, to adjustment, to “habit” formation, to the normality of the path. It leads to learning a code of exploration. On condition no “terrorizing” recollection for an otherwise “similar” situation is touched. As a result, those “habits” can lead to more superficial explorations, except the state of “alert”. Repeatability also leads to automatizing explorations, which become stereotypes. An accident, or some deviation in the introspection angle, may trigger “unpredictable reactions”.

Hopefully, my presentation so far has rendered the reasons for certain random conducts a little less “enigmatic”.

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[1] ditention = a state of attention modified by the intrusion of secondary affective elements, a state characteristic for certain human relations (after Henri Piéron; my translation)

[2] with the elementary specification that, the stronger the feeling, the less intense the interference