

The Wisdom Page

The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business by Charles Duhigg

Reviewed by Tom Lombardo

The Power of Habit provides a general theory of the nature of habits. Though rather simple and streamlined in form, it illustrates, through numerous and diverse examples, how habits structure and determine our lives, both individually and collectively. (Just as people do, organizations have habits too). Finally, the book offers varied examples and practical activities for gaining control over our habits and changing them.

In fact, for Charles Duhigg, habit is a universalist idea: In his view, it appears that all of individual human psychology and all of social and collective behavior can be understood as nothing but sets of habits. Given this mindset, at times it seems that he is trying to forcefully squeeze or confusedly jam all manner of elements and nuances of human life into this one model, stretching the model beyond credibility.

After touching on many of these varied illustrations of the expansive nature of habits, when the author comes to the topic of willpower (and if the reader is familiar with Baumeister's and Tierney's book on willpower), he may initially provoke incredulity when he states that willpower is a habit as well. But after deeper consideration, it will hit you that looking at willpower as a habit is enlightening and illuminating. Willpower --through acts of willpower--is something that is practiced and can be exercised and strengthened.

Habit, indeed, as Duhigg argues, is a powerful theoretical concept. It provides an explanation for the stability we observe in human behavior, but it also provides a framework for understanding psychological change: We stay the same by repeating our habits; we change by changing our habits--a simple and direct formula for life. Habits can explain why we are stuck (in the past), but it is also true that the tenacious and repetitive exercise of certain behaviors is the way by which we can realize future goals and change our way of life. Routinely eat well and one gets healthier; exercise regularly and one gets more fit and stronger; read and study on a regular basis and one gets educated (all other things being equal).

In fact, following Aristotle, as well as many contemporary thinkers, one develops character and becomes virtuous by repeatedly expressing (and hence practicing) virtuous acts. One becomes a better person by doing virtuous acts--by living the life of virtue. The good is a habit. (As Gretchen Rubin points out, it's what you do everyday--and not just once in a while--that is really important.)

In contemporary educational theory and practice, repetition has gotten a bad name: As the modern argument goes, students need to develop creative skills and not just engage in rote learning and practice. But without practice, without the repetitious and often exhausting exercise of skills and capacities, excellence does not emerge. Moreover, habits become motives: The more something is practiced, the better one gets at it and the greater the desire to repeat it. The more you learn, the more you want to learn; the more you exercise, the more you want to exercise.

In my opinion, though, the biggest flaw in the book is how oblivious the whole exposition is to the classic history of psychological research on habits. Duhigg cites recent research, but he says nothing about B. F. Skinner, Pavlov, Watson, or almost any other psychologist from earlier times. (Duhigg does discuss William James a bit.) In this regard, it is noteworthy that Duhigg's theory of habits and human motivation, in fact, is essentially a model of operant conditioning (see Skinner and Clark Hull). Skinner and Hull also believed that habits were pretty much everything. But there is no credit given to or discussion of the rich and informative work of these psychologists, among others. Further, Duhigg does not discuss the central importance of "association" psychology and philosophy--the foundation of habits--that runs back over two hundred years.

I don't know whether Duhigg believes he is saying something new in his book, but almost all his basic ideas can be found in earlier psychological research and writings. In fact, he totally misses many central elements and implications pertaining to habits simply because he does not seem to be familiar with the great wealth of information to be found in experimental psychology. As someone interested in the history and evolution of human thought, it is fascinating to me how frequently people believe that they have discovered something new when in fact it has been (often repeatedly) observed or thought out before by others. Such is the ignorance and arrogance of the present relative to the past.