

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 6, No 2 (2021)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy SI: Conatus - The Will to Persist



Spinoza's Conatus Undoes Bourdieu's Habitus

Josep Maria Bech

doi: [10.12681/cjp.25632](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.25632)

Copyright © 2021, Josep Maria Bech



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Bech, J. M. (2021). Spinoza's Conatus Undoes Bourdieu's Habitus. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 6(2), 131-152. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.25632>

Spinoza's Conatus Undoes Bourdieu's Habitus

Josep Maria Bech

University of Barcelona, Spain

E-mail address: jmbech@ub.edu

ORCID iD: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0259-9419>

Abstract

Bourdieu's intermittent allusions to Spinoza's conatus disclose the weaknesses of his concept of habitus. A thorough inspection of his involvement with the Spinozist legacy reveals a long-lasting inconsistency, for he expects that conatus will assist him in both 1) grounding the habitus and solving the uncertainties that surround this notion by endorsing a strong conatus, impervious to the resistances it will eventually encounter; and 2) reinstating agency in the structuralist mindset, a program retrospectively admitted by Bourdieu in 1987 and bound to a weak conatus, exposed to the interfering resistance of exterior forces and thus determined by the interaction with contingent events. Bourdieu noticed this incongruity around 1993. At that time, he renounced to buttressing the habitus by means of the dynamizing character of conatus. So began the later evolution of his thought, linked to the antithetical demand of both a weak and a strong conatus, a request commanded in its turn by an overarching habitus. One outcome of this conflict is that agency can hardly be summoned if Bourdieu's conception of a "strong" conatus prevails and the dispositions making up the habitus are irreversible. In contrast, both Bourdieu's appeal to controlled improvisation, and the ensuing concept of strategy, demand a "weak" conatus. Overall, the notion of habitus has been dubbed "a Trojan Horse for determinism" and endorses in fact what might be called the "mythology of permanence," that is, the historically long-held belief in an all-embracing everlastingness. Bourdieu's use of Spinoza's conatus, in sum, besides highlighting the immutable social reproduction entailed by the habitus, acts as a litmus test for the ambiguities and shortcomings of this notion.

Keywords: *conatus; habitus; agency; determinism; strategy; hysteresis; Spinoza; Bourdieu*

I. Conatus raises opposite expectations

Bourdieu's recurrent references to Spinoza's *conatus* reveal the fragility of his concept of *habitus*. As will be shown, Bourdieu's use of conatus not only acts as a sort of litmus test for the uncertainties and failings of the habitus but primarily brings to light that this concept entails immutable social reproduction and so reinforces the charge of being a kind of "Trojan Horse" for determinism. In fact, the support that Bourdieu expected from conatus backfired because he applied this notion in conflicting ways, which gave an unsettling blow to the already staggering habitus.

As will be discussed in detail below, Bourdieu summons the Spinozist legacy in opposite ways. In his scattered uses of Spinoza's conatus, two contradictory demands may be discerned. He expects that conatus may assist him in:

1) *Grounding the habitus*, i.e. solving the uncertainties that surround this notion. Does the habitus really exist? Is not this concept a groundless hypostatization? Is its alleged permanence warranted? These ambiguities bid endorsing a *strong conatus*, i.e. a sort of "engine of the habitus" endowed with un-revisable strength and impervious to the resistances it will eventually encounter. Bourdieu's misreading of Spinoza pushes its roots in the rigidity imposed by a well-grounded habitus.

2) *Re-instating agency* in the structuralist mindset, a program retrospectively acknowledged by Bourdieu in 1987. This desired re-establishment demands a *weak conatus*, i.e. a revisable conatus exposed to the interfering resistance of exterior forces, and thus congruent, in this respect, with Spinoza's doctrine. The predicate "weak" alludes to a mode of existence altogether oriented upon itself, albeit devoid of self-consciousness and uncommitted to clear-cut aims. Primarily, it becomes determined by interactions of contingent events (hence its "weakness").

Bourdieu noticed this inconsistency around 1993. He saw that an alleged "dynamizing character" of conatus (Bourdieu endorsed this view from 1984 to 1993) does not assist in neither grounding the habitus nor re-instating agency. In his later thought he tried to solve this twofold quandary by subordinating conatus to habitus, while retaining the muted antagonism between a *weak* and a *strong* version of conatus. A scrutiny of the Spinozian background of conatus (the staple reference for Bourdieu) appears indispensable for revealing the full impact of this incongruity.

II. Conatus and the social sciences

According to Spinoza, as is well known, substance (Spinoza's immanent God, the *natura naturans*) is infinitely productive, has generated everything, and ex-

presses itself through the finite *modi*, all of them impelled by the affirmative force of the conatus. More precisely, Spinoza derives the notion of conatus from his metaphysical thought concerning finite things and their relation to the infinite substance, God: each finite thing is a determinate expression of the essence of God, hence an expression of God's power. Nothing can be destroyed except by an external cause. This fundamental principle applies to all finite modes.

"Conatus," therefore, indicates a general tendency towards self-preservation. Each thing, be it conceived under either thought or extension, "endeavours to persist in its own being" and has an "active power" to stay in that way. This conatus remains constant unless actively interfered with (this is what the Bourdieuan occasional endorsement of a "strong" conatus tends to forget).

While the fundamental thesis of the conatus doctrine is that "each thing, insofar as it is in itself (*quantum in se est*), endeavours (*conatur*) to persevere in its being,"¹ when Spinoza speaks of a thing as far as it is in itself, however, he appears to mean "insofar as it is unaffected by anything else." It is worthwhile to remark that in the same *Eth.* III6 he states that nothing has "in itself" anything by which it can be destroyed ("While we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we can find nothing in it which could destroy it."²). In the next proposition, Spinoza understands this "endeavour"³ (*conatus*) as a "power" (*potentia*), displayed by "each thing, in so far as it can by its own power [*de potentia*]." This is "the power, or endeavour, by which [each thing] endeavours to persevere in its being."⁴

In short: according to Spinoza, things (modes) affect each other while each strives to maintain its own being. Thus, what a thing actually does is not the outcome of its endeavour or power alone. It results, on the contrary, from the interaction between its endeavour or power and the endeavours or powers of the other things that affect it. The conatus of any entity can only be destroyed by an exterior force. "Everything essentially opposes (*opponitur*) anything that can threaten its existence."⁵ Stuart Hampshire furnished a clear rendering of this circumstance:

¹ *Eth.* III6. References to Spinoza's *Ethics*: Capital Roman numerals designate Books I-V. Cf. Edwin Curley, ed., *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. 1 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985).

² *Eth.* III4.

³ This should not be understood, of course, in reference to the "endeavour" of someone who has conscious aims or objectives, because according to Spinoza the body as well as the mind can be said to "endeavour." "Will" is only a type of conatus. Cf. *Eth.* III9.

⁴ *Eth.* III7.

⁵ *Eth.* III6.

The identity of any particular thing in nature logically depends on its power of self-maintenance [...]. This tendency, in spite of external causes, makes it the particular thing that it is [...]. The greater the power of self-maintenance of the particular thing in the face of external causes, the greater reality it has, and the more clearly it can be distinguished as having a definite nature and individuality.⁶

It should come as no surprise, therefore, the assiduous involvement of the social and political sciences with the idea of conatus. “While the philosophical reading of Spinoza sets out by the concepts of *causa sui* and substance, the sociological reading begins with the concept of conatus.”⁷ Small wonder, because intuitively the conatus undergirds the life trajectory of any human being as set against the backdrop of successive social contexts. This pre-eminence has been repeatedly highlighted: “The concept of conatus, i.e. the tendency of everything to persevere in its being, is the Spinozist concept chiefly favoured by the social sciences.”⁸ This positive reception, however, must be profiled against the ideological pressures of our age, which have tended to view the Spinozist conatus as the “figurehead (figure tutélaire), in former times occupied by Marx, of a critical-materialist philosophy.”⁹ It has happened, in short, that,

Spinozism has mesmerized present-day political thought not only through its ages-old aura of materialism and radical atheism but also by its socio-political mindset, which privileges force and struggle for power and denounces the contractualist fetishism adopted by the bourgeois political standpoint.¹⁰

III. Grounding the habitus

Bourdieu repeatedly saw the necessity of grounding the habitus, which meant above all justifying its existence, countering its shortcomings, and offsetting

⁶ Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951), 122.

⁷ Frédéric Lordon, “Conatus et institutions: Pour un structuralisme énergétique,” *L'Année de la régulation* 7 (2003): 118.

⁸ Yves Citton, and Frédéric Lordon, *Spinoza et les sciences sociales* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2008), 18.

⁹ Antoine Lilti, “Rabelais est-il notre contemporain? Histoire intellectuelle et herméneutique critique,” *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 59, no. 4 (2012): 80.

¹⁰ Citton, and Lordon, 15.

its fragility. But he deployed this concept in manifold ways, which jeopardizes the search for an ultimate formula. Habitus exists in many forms, has a wide range of uses, and operates in several levels. In the words of Karl Maton,

Habitus is one of the most misunderstood, misused and hotly contested of Bourdieu's ideas. It can be both revelatory and mystifying, instantly recognizable and difficult to define, straightforward and slippery. In short, despite its popularity, 'habitus' remains anything but clear.¹¹

The habitus must be defended against current indictments. Chiefly among them are the charge of being a baseless construction or reification and its alleged inability to explain social change (its covert imposition of determinism is a quandary discussed below). In fact, the habitus is a conservative notion, hardly amenable to any sort of learning process and resistant to development and change. The baffling disparity between the generative experiences of any habitus and the resulting dispositions has also been remarked. These dispositions are simply tendencies to act in a particular way, yet if closely observed entail several riddles. How are they formed? Do they need to become indefinitely actualized, or they get extinct by lack of effective realization? Can they disappear under the pressure of a systematic counter-socialization?

Small wonder if, as will be discussed in detail below, Bourdieu's references to Spinoza's conatus are intertwined with his repeated efforts to specify the concept of habitus. Brought to its simplest features, habitus is the system of socially constituted dispositions that guides agents in their perception and action. In Bourdieu's words, habitus is the "past that survives in the present, [...] laid down in each agent by his [sic] earliest upbringing." This temporal dimension of the habitus is best highlighted by its socio-somatic aspect, which amounts to a long-lasting encounter between a knowing body and a repressed but unconsciously enacted history. This time-boundedness means, among other things, that

the habitus acquired in the family underlies the structuring of school experiences, [so that] the habitus transformed by schooling, itself diversified, in turn underlies the structuring of all subsequent experiences.¹²

¹¹ Karl Maton, "Habitus," in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. Michael James Grenfell, 48-64 (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008), 49.

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 82, and 8 [originally published as *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*

Bourdieu stresses the taken-for-granted ways of perceiving, thinking, and acting on the part of social actors immersed in their everyday habits.¹³ This explains Bourdieu's long-held fascination with Spinoza's conatus, albeit distorted by his "strong" misreading of the philosopher. Conatus grants propensities to people thanks to the habitus they have acquired. These predispositions impel them to act in specific ways and evolve into lifelong personal projects, even if they tend to remain unconscious.

Still, an array of fundamental questions remains unsolved¹⁴. How can a single habitus account for a vast number of practices and discourses? How does the sedimentation of past experiences mutate into an array of propensities and dispositions? Granting the temporality of the habitus (it is neither wholly structural nor entirely subjective), how does it activate the passivity of simple habits, dynamizing their pastness and converting them into actuality? In a wider scope, how can extra-corporal reality become embodied? How can an array of socializing experiences cohabit in the same body? How can they stay there long, and how are they mobilized at the opportune moments of a social trajectory? In conclusion, is habitus "often little more than theoretical icing on an empirical cake" so that "the concept can be removed without any loss of explanatory power?"¹⁵

These difficulties increase if we consider the structure of the habitus. It consists in both the *hexis* (i.e. the unconsciously interiorized ways to relate to and to use our body, such as physical demeanour, bodily dispositions and linguistic accent) and more diffuse mental habits (principles and values oriented to practice, schemes of perception, classification, feeling and action, also unconsciously internalized and far different from simple habits, for they allegedly facilitate new solutions to new situations without previous deliberation). As to the *hexis* dimension of the habitus, it is worthwhile to recall the origins of this notion. Already Aristotle pointed out that any intention to act must be coupled to an "efficient cause" whose staying power greatly surpasses that of the habit, seen as a mere array of basic motor acts. The *hexis* ap-

(Geneva: Droz, 1972)].

¹³ It is worthwhile to stress that *habit* and *conatus* reinforce each other. Any habit tends to persist, and conversely anything that persists is somehow habitual. Habit is the inevitable consequence of conatus, and conatus is what habits necessarily possess.

¹⁴ The ahistoricism and limitless validity of the habitus come into view by comparison with the Bourdieuan concept of "field," which possesses only "regional" validity. These "fields," as Bernard Lahire puts it, "are nowhere to be found in the Guayaki society described by Pierre Clastres or in Claude Lévi-Strauss' Nambikwara." Cf. Felice Dassetto, and Bernard Lahire, "À propos de l'ouvrage de Bernard Lahire, Dans les plis singuliers du social," *Recherches Sociologiques* 44, no. 2 (2013): 161.

¹⁵ Maton, 63.

peared thus as an acquired, active, and persistent condition, a sort of hoarded knowledge which stays permanently committed and never becomes passive. Bourdieu inherited these Aristotelian views, and in his later work the *hexis* became crucial for understanding the disposition to act, for it designates both the (socially conditioned) physical body, its gestures and attitudes, and above all its constituting efficacy.

Regrettably, these quandaries have been often misunderstood by commentators: “Bourdieu’s sociology allows a detailed approach to the way in which conatus works, and conversely its conceptual foundations can be enhanced by means of Spinoza’s philosophy [...]. This sociology could indeed adopt the conatus as the principle of action it evidently lacks.”¹⁶ It has been said as well that conatus undergirds habitus in multiple ways. This view, however, tends to aggravate the congenital blur of habitus:

Bourdieu uses his concept of habitus to generalize through quite different domains of human activity. Its originality is to suggest that these may be an underlying connection or common imprint across a broad sweep of different types of behaviour, including motor, cognitive, emotional or moral behaviours. But this very appealing conceptual versatility sometimes renders ambiguous just what the concept actually designates empirically.¹⁷

To overcome these perplexities, it is worthwhile to inspect Bourdieu’s involvement with Spinoza’s conatus. His references are sparse, and their meaning underwent a subtle turnaround over time. A gradual loss of relevance can indeed be observed. In the initial uses of the term (roughly from 1984 to 1993), conatus simply “dynamizes”¹⁸ the habitus. Bourdieu’s initially far-reaching attitude, however, softens somehow during a brief, intermediate period (approx. from 1993 to 1996), when conatus no longer commands or determines habitus and merely “inhabits” (or “is located in”) it. Lastly, in the final years from 1994 to 2001, the reversal is complete. Now it is conatus that “is fulfilled by” (or emerges “embodied in”) the habitus. In other words, conatus appears prevailed upon by habitus in this later time. As a result, it seems to possess the “strong” features surmised by Bourdieu, while it merely

¹⁶ Lordon, 124.

¹⁷ David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 109.

¹⁸ Steve Fuller carelessly presupposes that Bourdieu’s whole oeuvre endorses this “dynamizing” power held by conatus by enabling the social agent to act in particular ways: “conatus provides habitus with its dynamic character.” Cf. Steve Fuller, “Conatus,” in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. Michael James Grenfell, 171-182 (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008), 178. But a closer look at Bourdieu’s texts detects a dramatic (and revealing) evolution of his thought.

replicates the habitus' imperviousness to change. Even when the individual's conatus is foiled by the ups and downs of human existence, his or her adjustment to the social world does not evolve.

Let us examine in detail this baffling about-turn in Bourdieu's concern with Spinoza's conatus. In a text from 1984, conatus assists the reproduction of social reality. Bourdieu asserts that there is

a multiplicity of simultaneous but independent inventions, albeit objectively orchestrated, realized [...] by agents endowed with similar systems of dispositions and, so to speak, the same *social conatus* (by which we mean that combination of dispositions and interests associated with a particular class of social position which *inclines* social agents to *strive to* reproduce [...] the properties constituting their social identity)¹⁹

Likewise, in a text of 1989 conatus appears as both the internal determination of the habitus and the ground of its tendency to perpetuate itself:

Given that habitus is genetically (as well as structurally) linked to a position, it always *tends to express*, through schemata that are its embodied form, both the space of the different or opposed positions [...] and a practical stance towards this space [...]. Its tendency to perpetuate itself according to *its internal determination*, its *conatus*, by asserting its autonomy in relation to the situation [...], is a tendency to perpetuate an identity that is difference.²⁰

At that time, thus, habitus seems to be endowed with conatus. A few years later (1992) conatus is understood, more precisely, as the specific inertia of the habitus (aka. hysteresis):

[In certain situations] conduct remains unintelligible unless you bring into the picture habitus and its specific inertia, its hysteresis. [In Algeria,] peasants endowed with a precapitalist *habitus* were suddenly uprooted and forcibly thrown into a capitalist cosmos, [which] is one illustration [of hysteresis]. [Likewise, in] histori-

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 176 (italics added) [originally published as *Homo Academicus* (Paris: Minit, 1984)].

²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, trans. Laetitia C. Clough (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 2-3 (italics added) [originally published as *La Noblesse d'État* (Paris: Seuil, 1989)].

cal conjunctures of a revolutionary nature, changes in objective structures are so swift that agents whose mental structures have been moulded by these prior structures become obsolete and act at cross purposes (*à contre-temps*). [...] In short, social groups owe this *tendency to persevere in its being* mostly to the fact that the agents are endowed with durable dispositions, apt to survive the social and economic conditions partly created by themselves.²¹

Around 1991, Bourdieu maintains that *conatus* stirs the action of the people holding power:

Power is animated by a kind of *conatus*, as Spinoza called it, a tendency to perpetuate itself, a tendency to persist in its being [...]. People who hold power or capital *act*, whether they are aware of it or not, in such a way as to perpetuate or increase their power and their capital. This *conatus*, which is *the constant movement* by which the social body is sustained, *leads* the different bodies that hold capital to confront one another [...].²²

Mitigating the approach endorsed thus far, in which *conatus* prevailed upon *habitus*, around 1993 Bourdieu begins to relax his stance and wavers between asserting that *conatus* “is located in” the *habitus* and precisizing that “*conatus* is a striving, inclination, natural tendency, impulse or effort.” This last depiction appears in a note to a text on issues related to family and education, where Bourdieu explains that

the father is the site and the instrument of the ‘project’ (or better yet, of a *conatus*) *inscribed* in inherited dispositions and attributes [...]. To inherit is to relay these immanent dispositions, to perpetuate this *conatus*, and to accept making oneself the docile instrument of this ‘project’ of reproduction.²³

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 130 (italics added) [originally published as *Réponses: Pour une anthropologie réflexive* (Paris: Minuit, 1992)].

²² Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France 1989-1992*, eds. Patrick Champagne, Remi Lenoir, Franck Poupeau, and Marie-Christine Riviere, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge: Polity 2014), 265-266 (italics added) [originally published as *Sur l'État: Cours au Collège de France 1989-1992* (Paris: Seuil, 2012)].

²³ Pierre Bourdieu, et al., *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, trans. Priscilla P. Ferguson (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), 508 (italics added) [originally published as *La Misère du monde*, ed. P. Bourdieu (Paris: Seuil, 1993)].

In this same year, Bourdieu envisages conatus as a tendency located in the habitus (as well as in the social field), for both are

*the site of a sort of conatus, a tendency to perpetuate themselves in their being, to reproduce themselves in that which constitutes their existence and their identity [...]. It is not true that everything people do is aimed at maximizing their social profit; but one may say that they do it to perpetuate or to augment their social being.*²⁴

In 1994, while asserting that the family and the education system are the main forces impelling social change, Bourdieu perceives conatus as the basic impulse for all strategies of social reproduction:

Families are corporate bodies *animated* by a kind of *conatus*, in Spinoza's sense, that is, a tendency to perpetuate their social being, with all its powers and privileges, which is *at the basis of reproduction strategies* [concerning] fertility, marriage, succession and, last but not least, education.²⁵

These "strategies of reproduction" appear hazily related to conatus (it is said to be their "basis" or *principe*) in another passus of the same text. There, Bourdieu maintains that they

are found, in different forms and with different relative weights, in all societies, and whose *basis* is this sort of *conatus*, the unconscious desire (la pulsion) of the family or the household to perpetuate itself by perpetuating its unity against divisive factors [...].²⁶

At the closing years of Bourdieu's lifetime (roughly from 1994 to 2001), he reverses his position concerning the consequences of conatus, which now appears "fulfilled by" (or emerges "embodied in") habitus. At that time, in short, habitus prevails upon conatus. In a work from 1997, conatus is fuzzily

²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, "Concluding Remarks: For a Sociogenetic Understanding of Intellectual Works," in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Edward LiPuma, and Moishe Postone, 263-275 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 274 (italics added).

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, trans. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 19 (italics added) [originally published as *Raisons pratiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1994)].

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 107 (italics added).

sketched as a historical dynamic wielded by the social world:

The social world has a history, and for this reason it is *the site of an internal dynamic*, independent of the consciousness and will of the players, a kind of *conatus* linked to the existence of mechanisms which tend to reproduce the structure of the objective probabilities [...].²⁷

In another place of this same text, *conatus* appears “fulfilled” by the habitus:

The inherited and therefore immediately attuned habitus, and the corporeal constraint exercised through it, are the surest guarantee of direct and total adherence to the often implicit demands of these institutions [*scil.* the corporate bodies]. The reproductive strategies which it engenders are one of the mediations through which the social order *fulfils* its tendency to persevere in its being, in a word, its *conatus*.²⁸

Finally, in 2000, while Bourdieu is describing the competition among the members of a senior management, the agents involved appear to embody the *conatus* of their social position:

In the struggles in which they engage to press their own ‘views’ [...] in so far as each of them in a sense *embodies* the ‘tendency to persevere in being,’ the *conatus*, of the position he or she occupies and which his or her entire social being, his or her habitus, expresses and realizes, the protagonists commit the capital they hold, in its different species and its different states.²⁹

Despite Bourdieu’s wavering, these references to *conatus* share a highly relevant trait. Bourdieu conceives a “strong” *conatus* because he assigns it an exclusive power of permanence and tends to disregard the Spinozian stress on the dependence of *conatus* vis-à-vis opposing forces.

²⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 215 (italics added) [originally published as *Méditations pascaliennes* (Paris: Seuil, 1997)].

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 152 (italics added).

²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Social Structures of the Economy*, trans. Chris Turner (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 217-218 (italics added) [originally published as *Les structures sociales de l'économie* (Paris: Seuil, 2000)].

IV. Re-instating agency

Appealing to the explanatory resources of the habitus and opposing both social physics and canonical structuralism, Bourdieu intended “to re-introduce agents” in a context dominated by the active presence of the past sedimented in the present. There, “embodied history, converted in nature and hence forgotten as such”³⁰ was hegemonic:

I wanted, so to speak, to reintroduce agents that Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists [...] tended to abolish, making them into simple epiphenomena of structure. And I mean agents, not subjects. Action is not the mere carrying out (la simple exécution) of a rule. Social agents, in archaic societies as well as in ours, are not automata regulated like clocks, in accordance with laws which they do not understand. In the most complex games [...] they put into action the incorporated principles of a generative habitus.³¹

Yet “recovering human agency from the grip of structure” (for this is what Bourdieu has in mind) presupposes building a case for agency (i.e. understanding how agents, presumedly, “are able to do otherwise”³²). This is a strenuous commitment because agency cannot but emerge circumscribed, or in other words: actors know little from the mechanisms governing social reproduction. They can behave only within historically rooted modes of activity, and their actions may have unintended consequences. Society encroaches upon (and intervenes within) human agency in the form of unconscious motivations for action and through specific stockpiles of knowledge. Individuals draw unconsciously upon this hoarded expertise while endeavouring to articulate it. Small wonder that the human disciplines highlight the tension between the power of structures and the positing of human agency, ancillary to a conception of the human being as both subject and object.

³⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Sens pratique* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980), 91.

³¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 9. Bourdieu is discussing the foundation of *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* in 1975 and in the same page he precises his thought: “In retrospect, the use of the notion of habitus [...] can be understood as a way of escaping from the choice between a structuralism without subject and a philosophy of the subject. Unfortunately, people apply to my analyses the very alternatives that the notion of habitus is meant to exclude, those of consciousness and the unconscious, of explanations by determining causes or by final causes.”

³² Every attempt to rescue agency, indeed, must confront the difficulty described by Barry Smart as “the dark side” of agency, i.e. the troubles hampering the active, creative, autonomous human faculty “to be able to do otherwise.” Cf. Barry Smart, “Foucault, Sociology, and the Problem of Human Agency,” *Theory and Society* 11, no. 2 (1982): 129.

Bourdieu's basic tenet is that the most resourceful or spontaneous actions undertaken by individuals reproduce the structures that brought about their habitus. As a result, human action is directed by dispositions beneath discursive consciousness. Both practices and perceptions are grounded on pre-discursive familiarity with the social worlds we inhabit. Our incorporated dispositions are triggered by both the spurs and the hindrances that eventually emerge.

The theory of habitus has the primordial function of stressing that the principle of our actions is more often practical sense than rational calculation, [that] the past remains present and active in the dispositions it has produced, [and that] social agents have, *more often than one might expect*, dispositions (tastes, for example) that are more systematic than one might think.³³

On the one hand, habitus is a model for understanding how we function as agents,³⁴ making deliberate choices within the constraints of a social space. Bourdieu's approach to action highlights its regularity and coherence, without ignoring its negotiated and strategic character. Action is not the automated execution of a rule. In this respect, it is a mystery that when people's actions and interactions generate new social institutions and cultural arrangements, habituses (and thus structures) consequently move on.

On the other hand, the subjective structures of habitus generate objective practices (they are *structuring* structures) but they result from the objective structures that govern social life (they are *structured* structures as well). The subjective structures that generate objective structures obey to prior objective structures. In fewer words: the habitus reproduces the structures that produced the habitus in the first place.³⁵ In addition, habitus is inadequate when confronting phenomena already explained by rules and intentions, such as reflection, cultural antagonism, or social change. Many issues that Bourdieu discusses are better explained intentionally.

a. An array of difficulties

Small wonder, then, if relevant commentators coincide in their adverse judgement on Bourdieu's effort to reinstate agency in social thought. In James

³³ Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 64.

³⁴ Stated in Spinozist vocabulary, the "second nature" in which the habitus consists, insofar as it descends from habit, is both *naturata* (i.e. history become nature) and *naturans* (able, that is, to convert in natural what is historical).

³⁵ The structuralist mind inveighs against agency: the truth of the social world lies on its hidden face.

Bohman's view, for instance, "Bourdieu's theory provides no basis for practical agency. He furnishes no reference to intentional level of explanations [*sic*] of what agents see themselves as trying to accomplish."³⁶ This spurning opinion is shared by Nick Crossley: Bourdieu's habitus ignores the generative role of agency. There is something more to agency than the concept of habit can fully capture. There is a creative and generative dynamic that makes and modifies habits."³⁷ Moreover, as William Sewell puts it,

In Bourdieu's habitus, schemata and resources (what he calls 'mental structures' and 'the world of objects') so powerfully reproduce one another that even the most cunning or improvisational actions undertaken by agents necessarily reproduce the structures.³⁸

Overall, this is a case of incompatible viewpoints. The habitus is ancillary to a dualism of objective structures and subordinated individuals, and the attempt "to re-introduce agents" must confront a determinist frame if, as observed above, habitus rests upon conatus in Bourdieu's "strong" interpretation. Contradicting his earlier belittling of a social life led by a "repertory of rules" which yet allow agentic resources, some remarks by Bourdieu seem to imply that individuals are dominated by objective social structures:

The habitus is the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary for those products of collective history: the objective structures (i.e. of language, economy, etc.), to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions, in [...] individuals lastingly subjected to the same conditions of existence.³⁹

Bourdieu highlights the ways in which domination perpetuates itself over time and does not discuss how they can be lessened or thwarted. He focuses on reproduction and repetition and insists that there is little freedom in social life. He does not fail to notice that "improvising" means at bottom "transgressing the rules in accordance with the rules for transgressing."

³⁶ James Bohman, "Practical Reason and Cultural Constraint: Agency in Bourdieu's Theory of Practice," in *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Shusterman. 129-152 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 145.

³⁷ Nick Crossley, "The Phenomenological Habitus and Its Construction," *Theory and Society* 30, no. 1 (2001): 95-96.

³⁸ William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 138-139.

³⁹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 85.

In the scholarly discussion of Bourdieu's understanding of the habitus, the references to determinism abound. Deserve to be highlighted, among them, the insight about "the impure determinism of Bourdieu's thought"⁴⁰ or the suggestion that "Bourdieu allows a structural determinism in the last instance,"⁴¹ especially if welded to Bourdieu's "strong" take on conatus. Most of them, however, adopt a staple query: How can an agent innovate despite the crushing weight of his or her habitus? How can an objective structure, independent of both the consciousness and the will of individuals, and bound to constraining practices and representations, allow a margin of initiative and creativity?

The presumed rigidity of the "strong" habitus suggests an associated difficulty, ancillary to the alleged "overwhelming might of the past." Agency can hardly be summoned, indeed, if Bourdieu's conception of a "strong" conatus prevails and the dispositions of the habitus are irrevocable. By invoking a "strong" conatus, as we have seen, Bourdieu implied that the habitus expresses the impossibility of amending, altering, forgetting, deleting, un-learning. But then, how can agency co-exist with a habitus whose chief characteristic is its permanence or durability, since it consists in a system of acquired dispositions that cannot change? Otherwise stated, the habitus is all-powerful, and its dispositions are sealed for ever. Therefore, the possibility of backwards alteration is excluded, and the dominance of the past appears inescapable.

b. Subjective expectations vs. objective possibilities

The unswerving character assigned to the habitus explains the survivance, amid altered settings, of precedent schemas for action. This is due to the decalage caused by the inertial properties of the habitus (in short, its "strong" conatus), which if not counterbalanced by external forces destroy any possible fit between mental and social structures. Bourdieu names "hysteresis" these inertial traits: "there is an inertia (or hysteresis) of habitus which have a spontaneous tendency to perpetuate structures corresponding to the conditions that produced them."⁴² This permanence accounts for the errors of perspective that lead social agents to "wrong" decisions and appraisals. "The hysteresis of the habitus [...] is doubtless one of the foundations of the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them, which is the cause of missed opportunities."⁴³

⁴⁰ Cf. Miriam Aiello, "Habitus. Per una stratigrafia filosofica," *Consecutio Rerum* 1, no. 1 (2016): 202.

⁴¹ Cf. Richard Jenkins, "Pierre Bourdieu and the Reproduction of Determinism," *Sociology* 16, no. 2 (1982): 270-281.

⁴² Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 160.

⁴³ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 83.

A hardened array of dispositions, therefore, must cope with a potential infinity of unforeseen situations. The inevitable transformation of the objective conditions enforces a gap between the habitus (a huge reservoir of history) and the present social experiences of his or her carrier. According to Bourdieu,

As a result of the hysteresis effect, necessarily implicated in the logic of the constitution of habitus, practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that in which they are objectively fitted.⁴⁴

Its determinist aura notwithstanding, and despite the negative connotations (deficiency, delay) suggested by the etymology of the term, the hysteresis has eye-opening consequences. On the one hand, it provides opportunities for the socially dominating strata to dominate further, whereas the dominated are bound to continue misrecognizing their (doubtless meagre) assets in the social game. On the other hand, as the precedent quote suggests, the inertia of the habitus (particularly highlighted in *The Logic of Practice*) seems to open a weird window of opportunity for the dominated. After all, it is conceivable that they reshape their practices upon noticing that their dispositions are manifestly ill-adjusted:

The presence of the past in the kind of false anticipation of the future performed by the habitus is, paradoxically, most clearly seen when the sense of a probable future is belied.⁴⁵

c. Individual strategies are impossible

Considering Bourdieu's "strong" view of conatus, the habitus presupposes a reawakening of the past that disables the individual's initiative. It is startling, therefore, that according to Bourdieu the habitus can allow *strategies*⁴⁶ (that is, ensembles of coordinated moves, oriented to an end) containing room for manoeuvre and presupposing improvisation. In his view, these practical skills for decision-taking imply a pre-reflexive, unconscious familiarity with the so-

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 62.

⁴⁶ Perhaps it is worthwhile to recall that in current parlance "strategy" is understood as an ensemble of coordinated moves, oriented to an end and presupposing intention. A conscious agent calculates the best relationship between acquired advantages and possible gains. The active response by the agent is bound to match structural constraints on the agent. Understanding the situation seems imperative.

cial world, acquired through a long involvement. Such practices are finalized behaviours:

the good player [...] does at every moment what the game requires. This presupposes a permanent capacity for invention, indispensable if one is to be able to adapt to indefinitely varied and never completely identical situations.⁴⁷

These strategies are not intentional modalities of action, and the agents are seldom conscious of them. While closely related to extant opportunities and exclusions, they cannot be the result of consciously determined aims.⁴⁸ They result from the interaction between the dispositions of the habitus and the constraints imposed, or the possibilities offered, by the social world. According to Bourdieu, besides, any strategy is the *opus operatum* in regard of habitus as *opus operandi*. He thus advocates,

working back from the *opus operatum*, from practices that reveal themselves to intuition like a data rhapsody, to the *modus operandi*, to the generating and unifying habitus that produces objectively systematic strategies.⁴⁹

This means that the habitus, understood as “a system of dispositions acquired by implicit or explicit learning, which functions as a system of generative schemes [...] generates strategies” adequate to both familiar and unforeseen situations. In both cases, these strategies “can be objectively consistent with the objective interests of their authors without having been expressly designed to that end.”⁵⁰

The link of Bourdieu’s “strategy” to a *weak conatus*, ceaselessly subjected to the constraints of opposite powers, has been remarked by prominent commentators:

The active resistance offered by conatus to a total annihilation by stronger exterior forces appears as an existential affirmation

⁴⁷ Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 63.

⁴⁸ Some strategies are both reinforced and concealed by a “second-order” strategy. Social games (for instance the gift) often imply that the players misrecognize the objective truth of the game.

⁴⁹ Bourdieu, *State Nobility*, 274.

⁵⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, trans. Richard Nice (London, Thousand Oaks, CA, and New Delhi: Sage, 1993), 76 [originally published as *Questions de sociologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980)].

that amount to a strategy. Resistance and strategy are entailed by the essence of any real entity. The idea of strategy permanently decides the stakes of life and death for any conatus.⁵¹

Overall, then, Bourdieu's subject cannot freely choose his or her strategy, for it consists in the crossing of multiple, heterogeneous causal series, "the individual trace of a whole collective history."⁵² A kind of collective decision (amounting to a "weak" conatus) prevails upon rational individual choice:

You can see that the subject is not the instantaneous *ego* of a sort of singular *cogito*, but the individual trace of an entire collective history [...]. In fact, nobody knows any longer who the subject of the final decision is.⁵³

Otherwise stated, intentionality plays only a subordinated role in Bourdieu's notion of strategy. The dispositions of the habitus are predominantly unconscious, for the average social practice does not consist in reflexive, intentional, and creative action. The social struggle can only take place by concealing the strategies involved.

V. A Trojan Horse nested inside another Trojan Horse

It has been often pointed out that while Bourdieu appears to defend voluntarism ("I wanted to reintroduce the agents that the structuralists tended to abolish") by endorsing controlled improvisation (i.e. improvisation within limits), in fact determinism prevails in his thought, as shown by his varying involvement with a "strong" conatus. Objective structures mould the subjective structures and these in turn shape once again the objective structures, which leaves scarce leeway to spontaneity. Jeffrey Alexander displayed figuratively this Bourdieuan liability when he dubbed the concept of habitus "a Trojan Horse for determinism."⁵⁴ According to Alexander, Bourdieu fostered a determinist upheaval from within the beleaguered Troy of the agency-homesick using (albeit unwittingly) deceptive means.⁵⁵ Extending this metaphor,

⁵¹ Laurent Bove, *La stratégie du conatus. Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 1996), 14.

⁵² Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 91.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

⁵⁴ Jeffrey Alexander, *Fin de Siècle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction, and the Problem of Reason* (London: Verso, 1995), 137.

⁵⁵ The agency-homesick have backed this subversion in a self-defeating way. After all, the Trojan Horse was the stratagem that caused the unsuspecting Trojans to request their foe (the concealed Greeks) into their strongly defended citadel.

the conatus may be viewed as another, in this case pivotal Trojan Horse nested Matryoshka-like inside the habitus (Alexander's staple Trojan Horse). It must be kept in mind, however, that this furtive conatus achieves opposite outcomes (its impact may be either subversive or reinforcing) depending on whether it is read as "weak" or "strong."

In the first case, Bourdieu's recurrent commitment to a "weak" conatus may appear as an unruly Trojan Horse for universal fickleness and unpredictability nested inside the alleged Trojan Horse for determinism. This Bourdieuan view, indeed, further jeopardizes the already questioned capacity of the habitus to explain permanence in the social world. Yet such permanence (unrelated to willed and intentional endurance) seems assured if we accept Bourdieu's "strong" reading of the conatus, which in this case can be viewed as the loyally nested Trojan Horse that reinforces the determinist sway of the habitus.

Still, deciding to what extent events *are* somehow permanent (i.e. whether permanence amounts to a socio-historical "rocky bottom") is of course a thorny issue. Concisely stated: do the effects of everything that has happened endure forever, or they undergo instead a progressive erosion and ultimately fade out? If perpetuation prevails, the "strong" version of conatus emerges as an antidote against disappearance and loss. On a wider scope, then, a concept of habitus supported by Bourdieu's intermittent preference for a tough reading of the conatus endorses the age-old assumption that can be called "the mythology of permanence."

This mythology amounts to a hypostasis of tradition and historical continuity. Its central tenet is a ceaseless staying power held by all outcomes along time. It is assumed, indeed, that they: *a*) remain immune to present choices; *b*) are supported by both manifest carriers and self-concealed undercurrents; and *c*) do not become exposed to disappearances, recoveries, distortions, or transformations. In short, they would fall prey to the Darwinian disparagement of calcified inheritances that result in unimaginable accumulations. Yet this is precisely what a habitus backed by a "strong" conatus is bound to bring about, because in that case all human beings would become "walking museums of ancestral decrepitude, pock-marked from ancestral plagues, limping relicts of ancestral misfortune."⁵⁶

In this regard, the gist of the preceding research involves deciding upon several alternatives. They set up the divide between a "strong" and a "weak" conatus, which is crucial, as already shown, for Bourdieu's incompatible projects. Does a specific conatus dissipate itself spontaneously the further it gets from its origin? Or does it maintain itself over time, in some way kept alive by other people's conatus? Or else does it remain unchanged unless

⁵⁶ Richard Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 90.

actively interfered with? Spinoza's position in that respect, as we have seen, contrasts with Bourdieu's wavering. Outcomes fade out, get eroded, undergo corrosion, are resisted. Some of them, fortuitously, survive. In other cases, further phases of a given process negate the precedent ones. Unintended consequences, on occasion, may deflect antecedent aims. Then permanence re-emerges (for it may be intermittent) with altered features.

References

Aiello, Miriam. "Habitus. Per una stratigrafia filosofica." *Consecutio Rerum* 1, no. 1 (2016): 189-214.

Alexander, Jeffrey. *Fin de Siècle Social Theory. Relativism: Reduction and the Problem of Reason*. London: Verso, 1995.

Bohman, James. "Practical Reason and Cultural Constraint: Agency in Bourdieu's Theory of Practice." In *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, edited by Richard Shusterman, 129-152. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

Bourdieu, Pierre, and Loïc J. D. Wacquant. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Bourdieu, Pierre, Alain Accardo, Gabrielle Balazs, Stephane Beaud, François Bonvin, Emmanuel Bourdieu, Philippe Bourgois, Sylvain Broccolichi, Patrick Champagne, Rosine Christin, Jean-Pierre Faguer, Sandrine Garcia, Remi Lenoir, Françoise CEuvrard, Michel Pialoux, Louis Pinto, Denis Podalydes, Abdelmalek Sayad, Charles Soulie, and Loïc J. D. Wacquant. *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Translated by Priscilla P. Ferguson. Cambridge: Polity, 1999.

Bourdieu, Pierre. "Concluding Remarks: For a Sociogenetic Understanding of Intellectual Works." In *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Edward LiPuma, and Moishe Postone, 263-275. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Homo Academicus*. Translated by Peter Collier. Cambridge: Polity, 1988.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*. Translated by Matthew Adamson. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Le sens pratique*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *On the State: Lectures at the College de France 1989-1992*. Edited by Translated by Patrick Champagne, Remi Lenoir, Franck Poupeau, and Marie-Christine Riviere. Translated by David Fernbach. Cambridge: Polity, 2014.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Pascalian Meditations*. Translated by Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Practical Reason*. Translated by Randal Johnson. Cambridge: Polity, 1998.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Sociology in Question*. Translated by Richard Nice. London, Thousand Oaks, CA, and New Delhi: Sage, 1993.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Social Structures of the Economy*. Translated by Chris Turner. Cambridge: Polity, 2005.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Translated by Lauretta C. Clough. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Bove, Laurent. *La stratégie du conatus. Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza*. Paris: Vrin, 1996.

Citton, Yves, and Frédéric Lordon. *Spinoza et les sciences sociales*. Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2008.

Crossley, Nick. "The Phenomenological Habitus and Its Construction." *Theory and Society* 30, no. 1 (2001): 81-120.

Dassetto, Felice, and Bernard Lahire. "À propos de l'ouvrage de Bernard Lahire, *dans les plis singuliers du social*. Individus, institutions, socialisations et d'autres aspects de son œuvre." *Recherches Sociologiques* 44, no. 2 (2013): 157-166.

Dawkins, Richard. *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

Fuller, Steve. "Conatus." In *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, edited by Michael James Grenfell, 171-182. Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008.

Hampshire, Stuart. *Spinoza*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951.

Jenkins, Richard. "Pierre Bourdieu and the Reproduction of Determinism." *Sociology* 16, no. 2 (1982): 270-281.

Lilti, Antoine. "Rabelais est-il notre contemporain? Histoire intellectuelle et herméneutique critique." *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 59, no. 4 (2012): 65-84.

Lordon, Frédéric. "Conatus et institutions: Pour un structuralisme énergétique." *L'Année de la régulation* 7 (2003): 111-146.

Maton, Karl. "Habitus." In *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, edited by Michael James Grenfell, 48-64. Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008.

Sewell, William H. Jr. *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005.

Smart, Barry. "Foucault, Sociology, and the Problem of Human Agency." *Theory and Society* 11, no. 2 (1982): 121-141.

Spinoza, Baruch. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. Edited, and translated by Edwin Curley. Volume 1. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985.

Swartz, David. *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.