

On Automaticity

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Automaticity is, according to psychologist and educator Benjamin Bloom, the ability to perform an action or skill "unconsciously, with speed and accuracy, while consciously carrying on other brain functions."¹

Doing a task that we have done thousands of times over the course of our lives but in a way that is unfamiliar to us can provide insight on how we operate our bodies due to xyz; can strengthen the stamina of our patience; and help us find new ways for completing a task. By participating in a prompted movement exercise, our attention is guided towards functions that may occur daily, yet through the prompt we are able to reflect upon our experiences of these functions in ways that we may not have during our everyday life.

An aspect of Butoh is one which involves stepping out of the social self. Becoming more susceptible to the environment in the same body, in which the attention is guided in a way that is irregular. Taking steps when walking that are unplanned and which don't follow the knowing body's relationship to its environment, make the body more vulnerable and reactive. One way many Butoh performers will contribute to orienting an unfamiliar relationship between themselves and the ground is by walking on their toes or points of the foot that are not usual.

While this example would be the a resistance of allowing a social automaticity² to guide us– simultaneously bringing one closer to their innate self– automaticity is also used as a tool. A tool to achieve a talent or greatness through sports, playing music, working a job with complex tasks, driving a car while trying to think about where you are going. You are thinking about how to get there, but not how to drive the car. Or, knowing your final destination, you are not thinking about how to get there.

¹ Benjamin S. Bloom, ed. *Developing Talent in Young People* (New York: Ballantine, 1985)

² "...several different forms of social representations become automatically activated in the course of social perception, triggered by the presence of their corresponding features in the environment." Bargh JA, Williams EL. *The Automaticity of Social Life*. *Curr Dir Psychol Sci*. 2006

These are examples of actions that can contribute to our being healthy, having higher dopamine levels, and supporting ourselves financially, hence it would be positive to practice them. Practice makes perfect. Just what is it are we practicing?

Conscious reactions, instinct, intuition, habits. How can we understand these physical acts and urges (whether it is our own or others) as ourselves; an impression of the society and groups we have grown with? The signals we act on are of a swollen quality, meaning, it is not so clear what the form is beneath the swell.

The process of an action, especially one which can be considered automatic is accepted without expanding on the intricacies of what is going into it. As we are taught by many parts of society to conform as a mode of survival, our bodyminds become less flexible. As we grow stronger (in the sense that somebody who lifts weights does); as more and more complex tasks and abilities become automatic signals, what becomes of the past? If the track of motion is more defined based on the automatic impulses we build with practice, and the train builds momentum, how much easier is it then to overlook each passing moment?

A moments' time to shine meaning or significance, out from the speeding tracks of the train, would depend on the presence of momentum and trust that there will be these moments, or that the track is not wack. Inherent in the train track is the repetition of the "sleepers", so in order for the track to function, there must be a perpetual line of wooden planks to hold the tracks in place.

As bell hooks says in *All About Love* "Living consciously means we think critically about ourselves and the world we live in."

"In contrast, the capable touch-typist doing 50 or 60 words per minute hasn't the faintest notion of what each finger is doing at any time. When you use the typewriter to compose a letter or manuscript, you are thinking about the ideas you want to get on the paper, and your speed of typing is controlled more by the speed of your thoughts than by your typing skill. What is more, your fingers are not only automatically hitting the right keys, they are also spelling the words automatically. If you were to try to concentrate on

what each finger is doing, the entire typing process would collapse. Conscious attention to what the fingers are doing impedes the automatic typing process.”³

Automaticity builds familiarity. As Wheatley and Wegner point out in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, “When we walk into a grocery store, we know automatically how things are supposed to go. We go in, grab a cart, pick food off the shelf, line up for a cashier who will take our money for the food, and we can go home.”⁴ “It’s this familiarity that can support comfort and confidence.”⁵ What are the dangers of comfort? Especially when trying to change the world you live in?

One negative potential of going through thoughts, tasks, and motions automatically is not noticing an intricacy of your current situation, or that in fact there is something outstanding in a familiar environment. One example is related to looking but not seeing; when somebody looks both ways before crossing the street, but does not actually process that there is in fact a car passing. Or when one walks down the street they live on at the end of the day, they step out of their perception and awareness of that space; with the goal of getting home. I am alarmed by the power of this, in which a checking out can occur when having the product so strongly in mind. However, this is also what helps drive thrive.

An example of a mandated precaution to prevent mistakes is for FAA pilots, who have to double check checklists by reading items out loud, visually checking each item, and touching each control button. “In Colombia, a multi-engine aircraft crewed with two pilots struck the face of the Andes Mountains. Examination of their FMS [Flight Management System] revealed they entered a waypoint into the FMS incorrectly by one degree resulting in a flight path taking them to a point 60 NM [Nautical Miles] off their intended course.... They had all the tools to manage and monitor their flight, but instead allowed the automation to fly and manage itself. The system did exactly what it was

³ Benjamin S. Bloom, “*The Hands and Feet of Genius*” *Automaticity*, 1986

⁴ Wheatley T, Wegner DM. Automaticity of action, psychology of. In: *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*. Elsevier; 2001:991-993. doi:10.1016/B0-08-043076-7/01747-2

⁵MSEd, K. C. (2023, November 9). *Automaticity—Why we act Without thinking*. Verywell Mind. <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-automaticity-2795018>

programmed to do; it flew on a programmed course into a mountain resulting in multiple deaths. The pilots simply failed to manage the system and inherently created their own hazard. Although this hazard was self-induced, what is notable is the risk the pilots created through their own inattention. By failing to evaluate each turn made at the direction of automation, the pilots maximized risk instead of minimizing it... a tragedy through simple pilot error and complacency.”⁶

Apart from this clear-cut technical example, I've encountered this process in how some adults interact with a younger person; treating the younger as if they are like they were at that age. Or really any bodily function that continues to be practiced in the same way: breaking a bone or any change in one ability of the body would force this practice to become more flexible, while throwing off, slowing, disabling the connections our parts make to create the whole.

In a world full of procedures, regardless of what the further action or product is, the first multiple steps will always have to be carried out, so once this relationship is established, practiced, and automatic, the person(s) will not have to think about how to do the preceding steps every time they perform a systematic act. However, this implies that there is a further product yielded from a series of exchanges. If love is a surrendering of power; of patriarchal and sexist beliefs; of the fantasy of having no emotional needs, of self, of anticipation,... is it possible that because of the trust involved in loving, our unconscious decision making is reliable, while also aiding an anticipation of the product or outcome?

If automaticity is a tactic for building a track of which to rely on and refer to as a sense of survival, does this mean that these tactics are an overarching mode of navigation; protection from not being lost? And how does love as a power to surrender morph the compass of our learned behaviors?

Referring to his ideal for man as a philosophical subject, Antonin Artaud wrote in the epilogue of his play *To Have Done With the Judgment of God* that "When you will have

⁶ https://www.faa.gov/sites/faa.gov/files/04_phak_ch2.pdf

made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom.”⁷

One aspect of this theory is that it is “the metaphysical body which desiring machines⁸ push against, and the counter-flow to the production of connections. The Body without Organs is not productive in the same way desiring machines are; it does not seek connections or new flows. However, its ebbing and flowing, repulsing and attracting nevertheless informs the production of connections.” What can we consider to be the compass in this case when in a state of this lack of organization that automaticity requires? And to reorganize, must the tenants of love be present to drive?

The concept of automaticity is a neurological example of an accumulatory system that supports the rate of low effort connections:

“In the context of walking, ‘automaticity’ refers to the ability of the nervous system to successfully control typical steady walking with minimal use of attention-demanding executive control resources⁹. Converging lines of evidence indicate that walking deficits and disorders are characterized in part by a shift in the locomotor control strategy from healthy automaticity to compensatory executive control. This is potentially detrimental to walking performance, as an executive control strategy is not optimized for locomotor control. Furthermore, it places excessive demands on a limited pool of executive reserves. The result is compromised ability to perform basic and complex walking tasks and heightened risk for adverse mobility outcomes including falls.”¹⁰

⁷Wikipedia contributors. (2023, September 22). *Body without organs*. Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Body_without_organisms#CITEREFBazzano2021

⁸ A part of a whole, the whole being a product.

⁹ Processes that regulate the human brain's ability to control cognition and goal-directed behavior are Attention, Reasoning, Judgment, Problem solving, Creativity, Emotional regulation, Impulse control, and Awareness of oneself and others. Executive reserves provide the ability to resist physical, emotional, and social harms throughout life because they recognize and handle pathological processes before they become clinically apparent. And allows individuals to compensate for aging, cognitive decline and brain pathology

¹⁰Clark DJ. Automaticity of walking: functional significance, mechanisms, measurement and rehabilitation strategies. *Front Hum Neurosci*. 2015 May 5;9:246. doi: 10.3389/fnhum.2015.00246. PMID: 25999838; PMCID: PMC4419715.

Because I am so well practiced in brushing my teeth with my dominant hand, the memory of my muscles instinctively tense and run like a motor. When I brush with my non-dominant hand I have to focus on how to even hold the brush, let alone the motion of scrubbing while touching the teeth.

Doing a task with an unfamiliar or unpracticed medium lends to the amount of attention that is given to each link in the act. Doing a motion with the dominant, comfortable hand can hinder exploration or perhaps blind an awareness of the possibilities of *what else?*

With necessary and daily tasks such as brushing your teeth, is the automation of our muscles perhaps a danger to learning to move in a way that remedies the past? How would this process relying on awareness change when you are a part of a community with pillars of love?

Rotating a practice of doing well-practiced work and unfamiliar tasks has been found to be an effective mode of maintaining engagement.

A study of *The Job Rotation of Nursing Staff and Its Effects on Nurses' Satisfaction and Occupational Engagement* found that “the correlation of job rotation, job satisfaction, and occupational engagement show that job rotation is positively related to occupational engagement and job satisfaction of nurses.” The nurses’ overall attitude towards job rotation was “neutral”.

“Deliberate practice is not the same as rote repetition. Rote repetition — simply repeating a task — will not by itself improve performance. Deliberate practice involves attention, rehearsal and repetition and leads to new knowledge or skills that can later be developed into more complex knowledge and skills.”¹¹ What does it take to practice deliberately while involving aspects of love within your practice? And how does this dependency on the novel contribute to an underlying addiction to consumption?

¹¹*Practice for knowledge acquisition (not drill and kill)*. (n.d.). <https://www.apa.org/education-career/k12/practice-acquisition#:~:text=Deliberate%20practice%20is%20not%20the,more%20complex%20knowledge%20and%20skills>

bell hooks points out throughout her book *All About Love*, that we all learn things that do not support ourselves to be vulnerable, loving, or to oppose a patriarchal and capitalist society. The tensions holding us in a place of dim reflection upon our pasts, are involved with how we are stigmatized to align with roles put in place by those in power of how we understand history. Developing automatic reactions could be used as a tool against these systems and for the individual.

How can we use these same tools that underlie our majorly repeated actions, for healing of the stresses that these learned actions cause? Do we need to fall first? To disorient and dis-order? One of bell hooks' messages is to allow love as our compass. If this is practiced, will this make falling easier, while combating the urge to automate the process that is hard to be present in?

In *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, Harold Kushner writes: "I am afraid that we may be raising a generation of young people who will grow up afraid to love,...because they will have seen how much it hurts to take the risk of loving and have it not work out. ... They will be so fearful of the pain of disappointment that they will forgo the possibilities of love and joy." It is not just a pain of disappointment, but a pressure to survive which can influence us to make decisions based on an intended outcome and not listen to what is happening in a moment.

"A book that doesn't address anyone, [Maurice Blanchot] wrote, [is] a book without an audience, with no destination except the unknown,... You wouldn't know her,... you'd have seen her everywhere at once, in a hotel, in a street, in a train, in a bar, in a book, in a film, in yourself, in your inmost self, this nameless recipient with her tall, long body who sleeps in a bed, and he watches her sleep as sorrow grows in the room, in the sound of the sea, and when she wakes he asks her, how can loving happen, the emotion of loving, and she tells him, only through a mistake. Love comes through a lapse in the logic of the universe, never an act of will. Until that night he hadn't realized how ignorant one might be of what the eyes see, the hands and body touch. Facing the black sea, leaning against the wall of the room where she was sleeping, he wept for himself as a stranger might."

- Sofia Samatar