

IRRITABILITY (NEED) AND AN-IRRITABILITY (FATIGUE): A DISORDER OF RHYTHMS – THE ONTOLOGICAL BURNOUT

Effort, Resistance, Action-Reaction, Sense of Life, Death, Habit¹

Marina Christodoulou
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Abstract. This paper discusses the concepts of effort, resistance, action-reaction, sense of life, death, and habit as explored by philosophers such as Xavier Bichat, Maine de Biran, and Félix Ravaisson. It highlights the idea that habit is formed as a result of the alternation between external forces and internal resistance. The paper also touches on the role of sensation and tonality in habituation, as well as the individuality of each living being's vital force. Additionally, it mentions the connection between different "frequency profiles" and the perception of time. Overall the paper at first explores the complex relationship between life, habit, and the human experience, as a preamble in order to then discuss the concept of burnout in contemporary society, particularly in relation to the pressure to achieve and perform.

Keywords: effort; habit; depression; fatigue; exhaustion; burnout

Introduction

Like the allegory of the Lucifer, living beings usurp the inorganic entities' being (ν), they exert dominance upon them because of their high irritability, but this is a short-lived reign, the resistance to death, and thus to the return to the inorganic *stubbornness*, can endure for a limited time, or simply for *time*. As Bichat writes, life consists in, or is defined as "*the totality of those functions which resist death*" (Bichat 1800/1802, p. 1) [*"la vie est l'ensemble des fonctions qui résistent à la mort."*] (Bichat 1809, p. 1)² – Bichat is one of the Vitalists, and some other Vitalists, the ones of the school of Montpellier, are the ones that mainly influence Maine de Biran, too. Accordingly, Maine de Biran's "le sentiment d'exister" or "le sentiment de l'existence", (cf., Dupuis 2005) which is interrelated with his concepts of the self, inner experience, and consciousness are to be understood as a *resistance* to death. This resistance to death, is more philologically said by Thomas Bernhard, thus: "Everything about everybody is nothing but diversion from death," (Bernhard

1978/1991, p. 71)³ or as I would re-adjust it: “Every habit is but a diversion from death, and some habits, i.e. the *life-taboo(d) technics*, are a diversion from the addiction to life and thus a shortcut to death, while other habits, the *life-tactics*, are the shortcut to addiction and the diversion from death”.

Notes on Effort, Resistance, Action-Reaction, Sense of Life, Death, and Habit

Xavier Bichat and Maine de Biran have similar and interconnected views on life and its relation to habit. Bichat thought that in order to understand life, which he defined as mentioned above, one should understand what he called the “habitual alternation of action and reaction”. Exterior powers from the inorganic environment influence the living bodies, to which external powers they constantly *react* and *resist*. The principle of life, he says, is unknown and can be only understood by its manifested phenomena, that is by “an habitual alternation of action and reaction between external bodies, and the living body”. (Bichat 1827, p. 11) The “measure [...] of life” he concludes, is to be found “in the difference which exists between the effort of exterior power, and that of interior resistance. The excess of the former is an indication of its weakness; the predominance of the latter an index of its force.” (Ibid.) So, we have the concepts of *effort* (from the exterior environment) and *resistance* from the living organism, which sounds as a precedent of the theory of *autopoiesis*, and then the concept of *force*, which is predominant in that period of time, up until probably Freud, with his concept of drives. (Cf., for further, Nicolas, Mouchet, and Fedi 2008) Habit is according to Bichat, then, what is formed as an effect of the alternation between the forces of *effort* and *resistance*, or *action* and *reaction*, which serve as the cause of habit. Maine de Biran employs similar conceptualizations (effort, resistance, force, excitation, will, alternation of passivity-activity, movement, repetition of movement) to portray the dynamics of habit in relation to both the faculty of thinking, the soul and to life in general. (See, Biran 1802/1987; Biran 1802/1970; Cf., Montebello 2000, pp. 27 – 28: “Habitude”)

“Habit, in the widest sense, is a general and permanent way of being, the state of an existence considered either as the unity of its elements or as the succession of its different phases” writes Félix Ravaisson in *Oh Habit [De l’Habitue]* (Ravaisson 1838/2008, p. 25). And then he goes on to talk about a certain sensation present in habituation:

Whenever a sensation is not painful, to the degree that it is prolonged or repeated – to the degree, consequently, that it fades away – it becomes more and more of a need. Increasingly, if the impression that is necessary to provoke the sensation no longer occurs, one’s distress and unease reveal an impotence of desire in the realm of sensibility.

From another perspective, as effort fades away in movement and as action becomes

freer and swifter, the action itself becomes more of a tendency, an inclination that no longer awaits the commandments of the will but rather anticipates them, and which even escapes entirely and irremediably both will and consciousness. This is particularly evident in those movements, initially more or less voluntary, that gradually degenerate into convulsive ones, which we call *tics*.

In this way, then, continuity or repetition brings about a sort of obscure activity that increasingly anticipates both the impression of external objects in sensibility, and the will in activity. In activity, this reproduces the action itself; in sensibility it does not reproduce the sensation, the passion – for this requires an external cause – but calls for it, invokes it; in a certain sense it implores the sensation.

The necessary condition of passion is the contrast between the present state of the subject experiencing it, and the state to which the cause of the passion tends to bring him. Like is unaffected by like. Electrical attraction presupposes the opposition of electrical states; chemical affinity presupposes the opposition of elements; irritation presupposes the opposition of the irritating substance and the organ on which it makes an impression. Such is the irritation determining the preparatory or complementary functions of assimilation. Sensation requires, then, contrariety between the state of the sensed object, and the state of the sense itself.

Hence if there develops within sensibility, as it receives the same impression, a tendency to persist in the same state to which the impression has brought it, or else to come back to this state, then the opposition between the state of the subject and the state to which the external impression has brought it increasingly disappears, and thus sensation continues to fade. (Ravaisson 1838/2008, p. 51).

The presence of a *sensation*, or a certain *tonality* (as Mark Sinclair expresses it), in habituation (*habitation* is the need for that sensation and its repetition) to which each organ-ism, that is each organ in part and the organism itself in whole, become accustomed to; a similar conceptual formulation to what I talked earlier as the “frequency profile” of the organ-ism, or the (bio-) *rhythm* (-analysis) of the organism. This is precisely what one is addicted to, or what being addicted to life means, in exact terms: being addicted to a certain sensation, tonality, rhythm, frequency; and these particular for each living being sensations, tonalities, rhythms, frequencies, are precisely the analysis of the *irritability* of being in living entities, or as vitalists have called it, of the *vital force*. I quote the relevant passages from Mark Sinclair:

It is this power of contraction and anticipation in habituation that produces a need for the sensation, a need that makes us feel uneasy when the sensation is no longer present, and this is why we often wake, for example, on a journey when the car has come to a stop. In this way, Ravaisson restates Maine de Biran’s argument in his 1802 prize-winning dissertation on habit: there is a certain tonality, a vital force resident in all

the sense organs that brings them up to the level of the actual sensation, such that we no longer notice that sensation. (Sinclair 2018, p. 149)⁴

[...] Biran had in turn, however, responded to Xavier Bichat, who, at the turn of the century, explained habituation with the hypothesis that all perception is constituted by an implicit, involuntary comparison ‘in the soul’, which compares the present sensation with those that precede it. Habit ‘blunts’ or ‘enfeebles’ sensation, because ‘in proportion as the same sensations are repeated, the less impression do they make upon us, because the comparison between the present and the past becomes less sensible’ (*Physiological Researches*, 49–50). When there is no difference between the present sensation and those preceding it, we no longer perceive the present sensation.

Bichat provided little justification for his hypothesis of unconscious comparisons, and Biran considered it contradictory and his vitalist hypothesis more convincing (see Maine de Biran, *Influence de l’habitude*, 302). But Bichat brings out the *temporal sense* of habituation more clearly than either Biran or Ravaisson. (Sinclair 2018, p. 150)

Each (living-being) is addicted to their own vital force (sensation, tonality, rhythm, frequency), and nobody else’s, even if someone else’s vital force is of better outcomes, or of less failures, as an “inspirational” phrase that goes around in the internet says “The soul would rather fail at its own life than succeed at someone else’s.”⁵ Or as Albert Camus wrote:

In the face of such contradictions and obscurities must we conclude that there is no relationship between the opinion one has about life and the act one commits to leave it? Let us not exaggerate in this direction. *In a man’s attachment to life there is something stronger than all the ills in the world.* The body’s judgment is as good as the mind’s and the body shrinks from annihilation. We get into *the habit of living* before acquiring the habit of thinking. In that *race* which daily hastens us towards death, the body maintains its irreparable lead. In short, the essence of that contradiction lies in what I shall call the act of *eluding* because it is both less and more than diversion in the Pascalian sense. Eluding is the invariable game. (Camus 1975/1979, p. 15: “Absurdity and suicide”) (Emphasis mine)

There are different alterations of “frequency profiles” between different people, different ages, sexes, cultures, and along with the difference in the “frequency profile”, seems to co-follow the difference in the perception of time, that is of *duration*. This connection was made more or less by Bergson in *Matière et Mémoire*, based, probably, on his own way of reading Ravaisson. (Cf., Sinclair 2018; Meechan 2018; Sibertin-Blanc 2007; and Hansel 2017)¹

Putting everything together, *need is irritability and fatigue is an-irritability*. When there is contemplative *effort* to satisfy the *need*, in order for the future of the cell

or the organism to be anticipated and expected (*re-being*), a *decision* (following a *contemplation*, or a *cognition*) is made, and a *habit* is formed; the present is formed out of those contemplations that achieve *satisfactions of needs*; different contemplations, and thus decisions, form different habits, and therefore from their succession and alteration, there appears a *bio-rhythm*. When needs are over-satisfied, due to excessive *irritability*, which is the excessive and accelerating *effort* in satisfying the *need*, i.e. excessive inhalation of oxygen, then *fatigue* comes in its place; an *an-irritability*, a *deceleration*, a *rest* from effort, even an *idleness*. Fatigue is natural and normal, it happens in necessary intervals, and it also takes part in the formation of the (bio)-rhythm, it is maybe the reminiscence of the anorganon, the inorganic heritage of the organism, the stubbornness of simply remaining, of being without becoming. But when needs are overtly and artificially multiplied amidst the (habits of the) culture of Civilization, (which in the case of the human must have a natural basis, that, as said, makes the human an over-irritable species,) then the effort needed to satisfy the needs intensifies, and fatigue comes more often and more intensively; thus the rhythm changes, the rhythm “*disorders*” (v). Maybe Civilization is the tool given to us, instead of sharp nails, or teeth, or venomous poison, in order to defend ourselves from that over-irritability, by devoting more to stubbornness, in order to self-preserve as a species. But instead of using this tool as a defensive mechanism for our self-preservation, that is, to decide what is better or worse for the satisfaction of needs that will enable the anticipation of *re-being*, we render the tool of Civilization the ‘second artificial enemy’. The ‘first enemy’ is the natural enemy of over-irritability; we imitate the natural enemy and built an artificial cultural enemy, of another constructed over-irritability. Thus, addiction to life is in danger of burning us out, since Civilization is not successful in being the *pharmakon* for the natural over-irritability, but instead it has become the *pharmakon*, as poison, with an extra layer of over-irritability, which Civilization imposes upon the human. The already fragile addiction to life of an over-irritable organism, such as the human, becomes even more fragile, when the human accelerates or irritates the already natural over-irritability amidst Civilization. The symptom of the *ontological burnout* is manifested in the burnout society, as Byung-Chul Han very accurately speculated on it in his book of the same title *The Burnout Society* [*Müdigkeitsgesellschaft*] (Han 2010/2015).

The burning out of the achievement-obsessed society

I will below critically analyze Byung-Chul Han insights from *The Burnout Society*, while giving my own ones I order that his conception of tiredness, exhaustion and fatigue, which spreads to a social level and characterizes contemporary society as a whole, is parallelized with my own views both in this Part B as well as its preceding Part A of this essay/article (Christodoulou 2023).

According to Byung-Chul Han, today’s achievement/performance society, with its concepts of freedom and deregulation, eliminates the obstacles and restrictions

that comprise the disciplinary society. As a result, there is a complete breakdown and absence of boundaries, as well as widespread “promiscuity”. (See, Han 2010/2015, p. 41) This is how Daniel Paul Schreber’s paranoid hallucinations, which Freud explained in terms of his suppressed homosexuality, no longer exist today. The “Schreber case” is typical of the disciplined culture of the nineteenth century, in which homosexuality was strictly prohibited; desire and pleasure was strictly prohibited. Depression is no longer influenced by the unconscious. The concept of depression has been interpreted by Alain Ehrenberg as a symbol of the “uncontrolled” and the “irreducible”. An explanation is given in terms of the clash between infinite opportunities and the uncontrolled. Consequently, depression represents the failure of the subject who aspires to be proactive due to the unmanageable. (See, Ehrenberg 1998/2010, p. 228 – 230) An achievement/performance society dominated by an excess of positivity does not consider the unmanageable or the uncontrollable, the irreducible, or the unknown as figures of negativity. The depression of the current subject is not preceded by any conflictive and ambivalent relationship with an otherness that has been lost. There is no otherness involved, however what causes depression, which frequently leads to burnout, is an overly tight, overexcited, and egotistical connection with oneself which ends up adopting on harmful and destructive characteristics. The individual who is driven to perform and ends up fatigued and unhappy, becomes dissatisfied with itself. (See, Han 2010/2015, p. 42) It is exhausted, fed up with itself, and fed up with battling itself. It gets fascinated with itself because it is unable to go beyond and out of itself, to be outside, to *trust* the other and the world. This paradoxically leads to the hollowing out and draining of the self. The self becomes entrapped in a hamster wheel that spins more and more rapidly on itself.

The digital/virtual technological environment lacks otherness and thus dismantles further the relationship with the other. In virtual realms, the “I” can move almost without regard for the “reality principle,” which would be the principle of the alterity and resistance. As Byung-Chul Han expresses it:

In virtual spaces, the ego can practically move independent of the “reality principle,” which would provide a principle of alterity and resistance. In all the imaginary spaces of virtuality, the narcissistic ego encounters itself first and foremost. Increasingly, virtualization and digitalization are making the real disappear, which makes itself known above all through its resistance. The real is a *stay* in the double meaning of the word. (Han 2010/2015, pp. 42–43)

The late-modern subject who is orientated solely towards *achievement* has an excess of alternatives but is unable to bond deeply. (See, Han 2010/2015, p. 43) Depression breaks all relationships, even one’s connection with oneself. Depression lacks a goal and is hence unoriented and renders the subject estranged from all

relationships and connections, it thus, according to Byung-Chul Han, lacking *gravity*, and especially in virtual environments “the *ego exhibited as a commodity*.” (Han 2010/2015, p. 43)

The subject who is forced to *perform* and *achieve* and becomes depressed is not the sovereign Nietzschean “superior man”, but rather the “last man”. For Byung-Chul Han, Alain Ehrenberg’s thesis that depression is a democratic form of melancholia misses this fundamental difference: “According to this view, the depressive is one who is ‘exhausted by his sovereignty’—that is, no longer has the power to be his own master. The depressive is tired from the constant ‘need for initiative’.” (Han 2010/2015, p. 44) However, for Han, the connection between depression and democracy should be sought elsewhere. For Carl Schmitt, depression would be characteristic of democracy insofar as it lacks conclusive force, the *conclusive power of decision*. (Han 2010/2015, p. 44) As Sylvia Borissova noted (Borissova and Christodoulou, Private Communication, 12 November 2023), this relationship between the last century and a half’s priority to the force (de Biran, Michel Henry), the impetus (Schiller, Freud, etc.), the vital impulse (Bergson), etc., is unlike Aristotle’s doctrine including not only the cause but the ultimate goal in soul, and this is, according to her, the *grand differentia specifica* of our time. This also reminds François Laruelle’s Non-Philosophy with its premises of the “democracy of all thought” and the resistance to the conclusivity of the final philosophical *decision*.

Depression is often preceded by the burnout, or the burnout-syndrome, which does not relate to a sovereign individual who has exhausted his or her ability to be “the master of himself”, but rather to the pathological result of *voluntary* self-exploitation. Thus, there is an important economic context to depression, which, according to Han, Ehrenberg fails to address. (Han 2010/2015, pp. 44, 49) The “industrial disciplinary society”, as Han calls it, necessitates a fixed identity, but the “postindustrial achievement society” [*Leistungsgesellschaft*] (or it could also be called the “performance society”, since Han uses the words performance and achievement interchangeably) needs a flexible identity in order to enhance productivity.

Classical psychoanalysis is dominated by the conflict model, where healing, according to this approach, involves *recognition*, namely, becoming explicitly conscious that an inner psychological struggle is occurring. This conflict model assumes the negativity of repression and negation. As a result, such a paradigm is no longer relevant to depression, which is in lack of negativity, as said. Although Ehrenberg recognises that depression is in lack of conflict, he continues to use the conflict model to explain depression. According to Ehrenberg, depression is caused by a concealed conflict, which is further suppressed by antidepressants.

The subject driven to achieve or perform competes with itself and succumbs to the negative compulsion of continuously outdoing oneself. This self-coercion disguised

as freedom proves fatal. Burnout is caused by this extreme self-competitiveness. As Han writes, comparing the industrial disciplinary society, which is characterized by the repressive superego, to the postindustrial achievement society, in the latter

the ego ideal seduces. The achievement-subject projects itself [*entwirft sich*] onto the ego ideal, whereas the obedience-subject subjects itself [*sich unterwirft*] to the superego. *Subjection* and *projection* are two different modes of existence. Negative compulsion issues from the superego. In contrast, the ego ideal exercises a positive compulsion on the ego. The negativity of the superego restricts the freedom of the ego. Projecting oneself into the ego ideal is interpreted as an act of freedom. But when the ego gets caught in an unattainable ego ideal, it gets crushed altogether. The gap between the real ego and the ego ideal then brings forth auto-aggression. (Han 2010/2015, p. 46)

Thus, psychological diseases such as burnout or depression, which are prevalent in the twenty-first century, exhibit self-aggressive features in general. One commits violence and exploits oneself. Others' violence is being replaced with self-generated violence, which is more lethal than the former since the victim of this violence believes he or she is free:

The late-modern achievement-subject is subject to no one. In fact, it is no longer a subject in the etymological sense (subject to, *sujet à*). It positivizes itself; indeed, it liberates itself into a *project*. However, the change from subject to project does not make power or violence disappear. Auto-compulsion, which presents itself as freedom, takes the place of allo-compulsion. This development is closely connected to capitalist relations of production. [...] Achievement society is the society of self-exploitation. The achievement-subject exploits itself until it burns out. In the process, it develops auto-aggression that often enough escalates into the violence of self-destruction. The project turns out to be a *projectile* that the achievement-subject is aiming at itself. (Han 2010/2015, pp. 46 – 47)

The subject obligated to perform is free of any externally dominant instance that forces and abuses it to labour. It is exclusively responsible to itself. However, the loss of the externally dominant instance is insufficient to destroy the coercive structure, but it does cause freedom and coercion to become associated. The individual forced to perform surrenders to the compulsion of maximum achievement or performance. The exploiter is also the exploited. To speed itself, the capitalist system substitutes external exploitation for self-exploitation. As Han writes in another part of his book, entitled “The pedagogy of seeing”: “The general positivization of the world means that both human beings and society are transforming into *autistic performance-machines*.” (Han 2010/2015, p. 23)

Conclusion

Contemporary mental disorders, such as depression, burnout, borderline personality disorder (BPD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), are not characterised by the mechanisms of repression and denial. These diseases arise from an overabundance of positivism, namely the inability to negate and decline. This is not due to a lack of permission to engage in any activity, but rather the belief that one is capable of doing anything. This elucidates the rationale behind the limited efficacy of psychoanalysis in addressing certain psychological problems. Depression does not arise solely from the repression enacted by dominating entities, such as the superimposed ego or what psychoanalysis terms as the Superego.

The aetiology of depression, sometimes resulting in burnout, can be attributed to such an excessively constricted, hyperactive, and self-centered attachment to one's own identity, ultimately manifesting detrimental attributes. The individual who exhibits a strong motivation to *achieve* and thereafter experiences exhaustion and unhappiness, as it were, develops a sense of dissatisfaction with oneself.

As already explained, the individual is experiencing fatigue, dissatisfaction with their own actions, and frustration with the internal conflicts they are facing. The individual has a sense of fascination with their own self due to their inability to transcend their own perspective, to exist beyond themselves, to place confidence in others and the external environment. This phenomenon paradoxically results in the gradual erosion and depletion of one's sense of self.

It becomes therefore obvious how the capitalist economy prioritises survival or the "bare life" and not the ancient ideal of the "good life" to a significant extent. The prevailing notion is that an increase in capital leads to a corresponding increase in vitality and quality of life: "more capital produces more life, which means a greater capacity for living." (Han 2010/2015, p. 50) The strict and demanding division between life and death envelops existence itself in inflexibility. The prioritisation of survival panic supersedes the concern for leading a fulfilling existence, or as Han writes: "Concern about living the good life yields to the hysteria of surviving." (Han 2010/2015, p. 50) The process of reducing life to its biological and essential components ("bare life") results in the removal of all narrative elements, leaving life devoid of its inherent richness and complexity. The aforementioned phenomenon diminishes the vibrancy of existence, a state that encompasses intricacies beyond basic physical well-being and vitality: "It takes *livingness* from life, which is much more complex than simple vitality and health." (Han 2010/2015, p. 50) In light of the fragmentation of society and the gradual decline of social cohesion, individuals are compelled to prioritise the preservation of their own physical well-being as a paramount concern, regardless of the associated costs. The absence of any teleological or purpose-driven framework in the context of pure survival appears to negate the necessity for maintaining good health. The concept of health tends to lose its intrinsic meaning and significance, transforming into a superficial

and purposeless pursuit: “Health becomes self-referential and voids itself into purposiveness without purpose.” (Han 2010/2015, p. 51)

The sanctity and purity of the existence of the *homo sacer* within the context of the achievement/performance society can be attributed to distinct factors. The purity of this concept arises from its inherent lack of transcendence, since it is confined solely to the immanence of basic existence, necessitating its preservation by whatever available methods. The concept of health has been raised to a deity-like status. Hence, the preservation of pure survival holds a profound significance. The individuals designated as *homines sacri* inside the society of achievement/performance have a distinct characteristic that sets them apart from their counterparts in the society of sovereignty: their existence has a striking resemblance to that of individuals who are alive but lack vitality and purpose. These entities possess a level of significance that renders their demise inconceivable, while also lacking the capacity for continued existence: “They cannot be killed at all. Their life equals that of the undead. They are too alive to die, and too dead to live.” (Han 2010/2015, p. 51) This society of achievement/performance evolved into a “*doping society*”. (Han 2010/2015, p. 51)

NOTES

1. This article is prepared as part of my postdoctoral research project “Ontological Exhaustion: Being-Tired, and Tired-of-Being: a philosophy of fatigue, exhaustion, and burnout” at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, implemented with the financial support of the National Programme “Early-stage and Postdoctoral researchers” – 2, Stage 1, 2022 – 2024.
2. Also translated as follows: “Life consists in the sum of the functions, by which death is resisted.” (Bichat 1827, p. 10)
3. Since I mention Bernhard’s work, I would also refer to his theatrical work *The Force of Habit: A Comedy* [*Die Macht der Gewohnheit: Komödie* (1974/1976).
4. References to Biran (1802/1987) and to Bichat (1800/1827).
5. Attributed to either a spiritual and religious writer Joseph Campbell or to the poet David Whyte in his poem “THE SUBVERSIVE SOUL”, Winter Thoughts © David Whyte 2018.
6. John Meechan in his talk “Rhythms and Drives: Quantal Ontology in Bergson and Nietzsche’s Naturalism” (2018), says: “an extensive parallelization of Bergson’s *rhythms* and Nietzsche’s *drives*, in the attempt of both philosophers to bridge the organic with the inorganic and thus the continuity of Nature beyond the anthropocentric and the anthroposcopic”.

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Dr. Marina Christodoulou

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-5721-833X

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology

Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

E-mail: marina.n.christodoulou@gmail.com