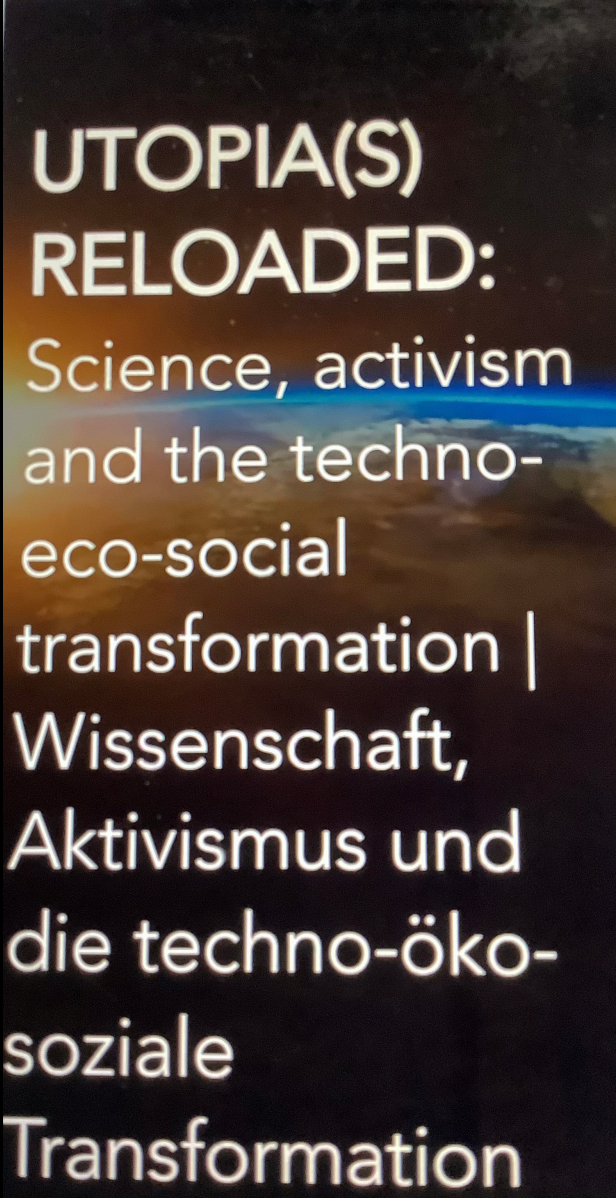


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Rituals, Society and Nostalgia

Raffaella Giovagnoli (Pontifical
Lateran University and GSIS)
giovagnoli@pul.it



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We use the word "rite" or "ritual" especially in relation to religion and myth to indicate those aspects of it that make religious experience possible in the mystical dimension.

Rituals are presented as sets of acts or normatively codified practices that form cultural patterns of a given society and are a representation of the cultural values and standards. They are fundamental for the institutionalization of roles, the formation of social identity and social cohesion.

The anthropological studies of Ernesto De Martino stress that the experience of the precariousness of human life (rather than natural events and therefore stereotyped behaviors) offer reassuring models to follow by building the same tradition. The sociologist Emile Durkheim and the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski analyzed the social function of rituals for the cohesion of communities. Differently, the anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and Meyer Fortes consider the social and cultural role of the myth that can extend to the religious sphere.

Psychoanalysis investigates the presence of an unconscious ritual in human everyday activities. Obsessive-compulsive personalities create personal rituals; a typical case from ordinary life is to verify that we have closed the gas when we leave our house or that we closed the door. Very common is to walk without stepping on the lines. For the tennis player Nadal is essential to choose the balls or to knock the ball a certain number of times, to align the bottles, to touch parts of the body in a certain way or to clean the lines.

Rituals express personal and social needs with a deep emotional involvement, without which they cease to exist. Rituals require different aesthetic components in different cultures and in different times; the rite must evolve to not lose its meaning. For example, in the religious sphere of Christianity, while for the Western Catholic community the organ sound is perceived as power and becomes a "divine" instrument, for the Eastern Christianity it is perceived as the mere sound of the organ and does not have any sacred sense.

Modern studies point the attention on the dynamic of the ritual. For example, Roy Rappaport studied the cyber dimension of the ritual and its implications for ecology and communication. Religious rites such as bullfighting is experienced by the participants with passion but arouses horror of animal welfarism. More positively, rock concerts or the mega-rallies take the form of a ritual and are experienced with a strong emotional involvement.

We can observe different forms of rituals:

- Initiation rite (for example the initiation of adolescents according to cultural and religious rites, or in Freemasonry rite of passage leading to the grant of the light)



- Rite of passage (Baptism)



- Propitiatory and apotropaic (ancient rites to propitiate a deity)



- Recurring rites (ceremonies related to the time of year, such as the opening of the academic year)



- Funeral rite



The philosophical debate on rituals is very interesting and present many different perspectives (Schilbrack 2004):

- pragmatic theory of knowledge (Rorty, Dewey, Peirce, James, Santajana, Whitehead).
- post-Wittgensteinian philosophy (Winch, Lerner, Austin, Searle, Habermas)
- existentialism (Heidegger, Sartre, Bernstein, Eliade)
- genealogical approach (Foucault, Edge)
- phenomenology (Merleau Ponty, Dreyfus, Cross)
- cognitive science and neuroscience (Clark, Van Gelden, Varela, Frankiel, Johnson, Graybiel)
- feminist epistemology (Grosz, McGuire, Butler among others)
- comparative philosophy (Sullivan, Kasulis, Law, Coakley, Clooney, Yasuo, Nagatomo).

Rituals as social practices are not individual routines or habits like to drink coffee or cappuccino at a certain time before going at work. Neither they are shared habits like to play tennis with a friend every Saturday morning.

They are shared because they are institutionalized so enacting certain rules and norms to be recognized and followed as social practices characterizing communities and societies.

Molly Farneth (2023) aims at convincing readers, in particular “ those that want to envision and build a different kind of world together of the need for rituals in which the communities people deserve to be enacted and embodied”.

Farneth gives examples of rituals that involve religious individuals or groups enacting the rituals of their tradition by somewhat contesting how they configure community or distribute power.

She recalls the exemplary event of the Philadelphia Eleven.

On July 29 1974 eleven women knelt at the altar of an Episcopal church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, waiting to receive the blessing and laying on the hands that would ordain them as priests in a denomination that did not recognize the legitimacy of that act.

Farneth underscores important functions of rituals as they mark boundaries and distribute goods so they could favor social justice. Among several examples presented by Farneth, in the case of the US-Mexico border, we can observe the connection between rituals and political contestation in debates borders (delimiting geographical entities) and boundaries (delimiting social entities).

The ritual can be assimilated to the notion of habit that is at the center of the traditional philosophical reflection. In this context, we must differentiate between two senses of the term:

I. Custom as *habitus*.

Thomas Aquinas inherits the Aristotelian vision of habit that has a "qualitative" element (evaluation) in action.

We also remember the famous book by Dewey *Nature and Conduct* (1921), which considers the habit as a human asset acquired in the socialization process that includes a certain order and creative elements of behavior. It is a mechanical dynamics continuously operating in our daily actions.

II. Habit as *consuetudo*.

Aristotle conceived the habit as a kind of mechanism that is analogous to natural mechanisms and somehow guarantees the uniform repetition of facts, acts or behavior by eliminating or reducing stress and fatigue and then making them pleasant. The habit as a repetition without reasoning is exemplarily discussed by Pascal and Hume. Bergson uses this term to describe the moral obligations as social habits that promote life and the social order. Metaphysical interpretations of the notion of habit are offered by Main de Biran, Hegel and Ravaisson.

In these cases we observe a peculiar interest in religious views. According to Hegel, the habit is fundamental for the existence of the spirituality of the individual subject; the subject can exist as a concrete subject and as soul, namely the religious content can belong to himself (with his own soul). The metaphysical perspective of Ravaisson considers the habit as a law of grace because nature reveals itself in spiritual activity. We therefore observe a natural shift from habits to rituals that can be considered as “social habits”.

Contemporary studies of habits in the field of neuroscience and psychology show several dimensions of habitual behavior.

There is a shared tendency to overcome the classical view of habits as simple routines to highlight their connection with goals. Bernacer and Murillo follow the Aristotelian view on habits as compatible with a neurobiological account (Graybiel).

The integration between routines and goal-directed behavior is at the center of important study in social psychology.

Wendy Wood observes that successfully long-term self-regulation involves habitually engaging in actions that correspond with valued long term goals; people exert self-control to inhibit unwanted habits, and they repeat goal-directed actions in stable contexts so as to form desired habits.

Actually, Farneth does not provide an analysis of the notion of habitual behavior also by considering transdisciplinary researches; she starts from the Aristotelian view as presented by Javier Bernacer and Jose Iniacio Murillo to highlight the ethical dimension of habits.

She plausibly criticizes Bourdieu's account of practices that gives rise to habits and rituals, because he is mainly concerned with the unconscious processes by which *habitus* takes shape and, relatedly, how the *habitus* plays a role in the reproduction of norms, structures and power relations.

Farneth refers rather to Saba Mahmood's description of women's participation in the mosque movement in Cairo, Egypt, that is an application of Aristotle's model of habit and virtue. Women teach classes, lead prayer meetings, dedicate themselves to daily prayer practices, and choose to wear hijab. Their practices not only express their values; they shape and transform the women who undertake them into subjects with particular habits and dispositions.

Therefore, they are the result of intentional practice in the service of ethical formation.

The self-conscious conception of *habitus* that is taken up in the Islamic philosophy and it influences the women's understanding of what piety is and how a person becomes pious.

Farneth provides a thoughtful view on the nature and function of rituals by presenting concrete social cases and examples that demonstrate the plausibility of the Aristotelian notion of habit.

We could instead consider interesting theories of collective intentionality and try to bridge the gap between I-intentionality and We-intentionality through a deep analysis of the dimensions of habitual behavior also in trans-disciplinary contexts.

However, the solid literature and richness of concrete cases make Farneth's work a plausible model to grasp the function of rituals in human life as source of virtues and freedom as well as expression of passions, beliefs and solidarity.

"Nostalgia" is at the basis of forms of anti-ritualism as it sometimes characterizes bad politics, i.e. the tendency of a group to define strong internal norms and values so to exclude others, even though this group has been largely criticized.

According to Farneth:

This particular nostalgia also depends on people imagining that there was a time and place when communities weren't so beset by conflicts and contestation, when folks agreed about what the rituals were, about who deserved what goods and who should be recognized as having what status, and about what kinds of people they wanted to become (...) I doubt there's ever been such a time and place, or any scale for any duration. Moreover, there are communities worth tending through rituals, and communities that are rotten at the core. (Farneth, 2023, 194)

Against anti-ritualism we observe that rituals often are sites of contestation without necessarily appealing to nostalgia. As an example of applied philosophical notions well discussed in the field of social ontology, rituals entail processes by which human beings allocate goods, recognize statuses, grant authority and hold accountable. They are fundamental in human life because they shape habits and dispositions of the people who participate in these processes. Rituals shape political actors of one sort or another:

(...) rituals are value-intensifying, they can help sustain public things, the places, objects, and institutions that are held in common by the members of a public, taken and treated as shared and special - even as sacred. They are ways of valuing those things, together. It is through collective actions and activities that people tend to the goods of their common life - and expand access to those goods - even as they go on arguing about them (Farneth 2023, 195).

THANK YOU!

R. Giovagnoli, *From Habits to Rituals: Rituals as Social Habits*, in R. Giovagnoli & G. D'odio-Crnkovic, *Habits and Rituals*, Special Issue, Open Information Science, De Gruyter, 2018, 2.

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