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# Social Practices and Normativity

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Turner's *The Social Theory of Practices* effectively criticized conceptions of social practices as rule-governed or regularity-exhibiting performances. Turner's criticisms nevertheless overlook an alternative, "normative" conception of practices as constituted by the mutual accountability of their performances. Such a conception of practices also allows a more adequate understanding of normativity in terms of accountability to what is at issue and at stake in a practice. We can thereby understand linguistic practice and normative authority without having to posit stable meanings, rules, norms, or presuppositions underlying the manifest diversity of social life.

**Keywords:** *normativity; practices; rules; language*

Stephen Turner's (1994) *The Social Theory of Practices* was a broad-ranging attack on the very idea of a "social practice," a widely deployed concept in the philosophy of social science, social theory, and the social sciences themselves. Early in the book, Turner noted that "a large family of terms [is] used more or less interchangeably with 'practices,' among them some of the most widely used terms in philosophy and the humanities, such as tradition, tacit knowledge, *Weltanschauung*, paradigm, ideology, framework, and presupposition" (p. 2). In my view, Turner has rightly diagnosed some fundamental conceptual failures in the uses of these terms. If these uses were all that were involved in "the practice turn in contemporary theory" (Schatzki, Cetina, and von Savigny 2001), then he has shown why that turn led to a dead end.

Elsewhere, I have argued that Turner failed to consider an alternative conception of a practice that is much more promising than the versions of "practice theory" that he challenged (Rouse 2002, chap. 5). Turner's argument was developed with sufficient care, however, that this alternative conception actually emerged within the book in shadowy outline, even though

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he did not recognize it as a genuine alternative. I have called this alternative a “normative” conception of practices, in contrast to the “regulist” and “regularist” conceptions of practices that Turner criticized.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I expand the significance of my disagreement with Turner. I argue that such a normative conception of practices is not merely a good way to think about practices. It is also a good way to explicate normativity, a concept and domain that have vexed philosophers at least since its modern emergence in the work of Kant. Moreover, the connection between practice theory in the social sciences and philosophical conceptions of normativity is illuminating, since regulism and regularism are among the most familiar philosophical conceptions of normativity.

Turner explicitly identified two related conceptions of a social practice. On one conception (regularist in my terms; causal in Turner’s), participants in a “practice” repeat the same or similar performances in some sense that is objectively or nonintentionally describable. Bourdieu (1990) on *habitus* might be one good example of such a conception. On the other conception (regulist or presuppositional), practices are performances identifiable by their common “presuppositions,” where the notion of a presupposition is irreducibly semantically contentful. The most familiar readings of Kuhn on “paradigms” (as presuppositions shared by all participants in a community engaged in normal science) exemplify the second conception.<sup>2</sup> Turner argued in both cases that there was no good way to make sense of what is supposed to be the same among the various performances of a practice or how its identity was maintained across multiple iterations of the practice. I think he was right in both cases.<sup>3</sup>

1. Turner did not use the terms “regulist” and “regularist”; I have taken them from Robert Brandom’s (1994) discussion of two inadequate ways of understanding the normativity of discursive practices. Turner instead drew a parallel distinction between practices as presuppositions and as causes. I think Brandom’s terms are more perspicuous, because they show the connection between these two approaches as two different but inadequate ways of conceiving the normative unity of a practice (either as governed by a rule or as exhibiting a regularity).

2. Although I do not put it in these terms, in Rouse (2003) I argue that it is a misreading of Kuhn to treat him as a regulist or presupposition theorist for the reasons that led Kuhn (1970, chap. 5) to contrast paradigms to rules. Properly understood, I think, Kuhn was groping toward a normative conception of practices, although he did not yet have the resources to articulate the significance of its difference from regulism.

3. Donna Haraway (1997) develops what I take to be parallel criticisms of regulism and regularism in terms of the implicit narrative structure of practices as the repetition of the Sacred Image of the Same rather than in terms of normativity. Like me and unlike Turner, she then looks to an alternative conception of cultural practices that accommodate difference rather than challenging the apparent continuity of such practices or the theoretical and political utility of taking seriously that continuity across differences.

To explicate what I mean by a normative conception of practices as an alternative to regulist and regularist conceptions, I need to say more about normativity. I construe this notion very broadly. I have in mind the whole range of phenomena for which it is appropriate to apply normative concepts, such as correct or incorrect, just or unjust, appropriate or inappropriate, right or wrong, and the like. Note well my use of normative language, “appropriateness,” in this initial characterization of the domain of the normative. Such a normative characterization of normativity will seem suspicious to philosophers, who have often been reluctant to take normative concepts at face value. Much of the early history of analytic philosophy, for example, aimed to show how suspect and badly behaved concepts such as “good,” “right,” or “just” can either be dispensed with or domesticated by explication in supposedly more tractable and respectable terms. The analytic tradition was hardly alone in these efforts, however. Typically, philosophers have either identified normativity with some special kind of entity (such as values, rules, regularities, commitments, or preferences), or explicated it in terms of another modality (such as logical, nomological, transcendental, or social necessity). The regularist and regulist conceptions of practices that Turner criticized are among such efforts to domesticate normativity, by understanding it in terms of exhibited regularities or presupposed rules.

There is, however, an alternative way to think about practices and normativity that does not reduce them to governing rules or exhibited regularities.<sup>4</sup> On this conception, a practice is maintained by interactions among its constitutive performances that express their mutual accountability. On this normative conception of practices, a performance belongs to a practice if it is appropriate to hold it accountable as a correct or incorrect performance of that practice. Such holding to account is itself integral to the practice and can likewise be done correctly or incorrectly. If done incorrectly, then it would appropriately be held accountable in turn. That would require responding to it in ways appropriate to a mistaken holding-accountable and so forth.

Such a conception of practices, as constituted by the mutual accountability of their constituent performances, can be retrospectively seen in many familiar discussions of practices and norms, and I will mention several of them to indicate that this conception is not idiosyncratic. Robert Brandom (1979) once suggested that “we can envisage a situation in which *every* social practice of [a] community has as its generating response a performance which must be in accord with another social practice” (pp. 189-90). Such a

4. For more extensive discussion of this conception, see Rouse (2006; 2002, chap. 5).

chain of responses need never terminate in an objectively characterizable social regularity. Alasdair MacIntyre's (1980) conception of a tradition also points toward such an interactive conception: "What constitutes a tradition is a conflict of interpretations of that tradition, a conflict which itself has a history susceptible of rival interpretations." (p. 62). I think both Brandom and MacIntyre were seeking a conception of practice or tradition whose coherence does not depend on an underlying regularity or governing rule. Further examples include Davidson's (1986) effort to characterize linguistic interpretation without reference to a shared language and my rereading (Rouse 2002, chap. 5) of Turner's own reinterpretation of Marcel Mauss on French and American ways of walking (Turner treats Mauss instead as providing an instrumentalist account of a causally constituted practice). We can also understand in this way Wittgenstein's (1953) suggested invocation when justifications run out, "This is what we do" (par. 217). Wittgenstein is often read as appealing to a regularity here, but one can instead give his remark the inflection with which a parent tells a child, "We don't hit other children, do we?"<sup>5</sup> Such statements do not describe what children actually do. On the contrary, parents say this precisely because and when children do hit each other. They do so as a response to the child's action, which tries to hold that action to account.

A normative conception of practices makes normativity irreducible but not inexplicable. There are at least three crucial aspects to its explication of normativity. First, the bounds of a practice are identified by the ways in which its constitutive performances bear on one another, rather than by any regularities of behavior or meaning that they encompass. One performance responds to another, for example, by correcting it, drawing inferences from it, translating it, rewarding or punishing its performer, trying to do the same thing in different circumstances, mimicking it, circumventing its effects, and so on. Donna Haraway (1997) and Karen Barad (2007) offer a suggestive metaphor for these relationships among performances of a practice by talking about them as "diffracted" through one another, instead of invoking the more familiar metaphor of "reflexivity."

Not surprisingly perhaps, such conceptions have most commonly arisen in accounts of discursive practice. Brandom's (1994) model of language use as practices of "deontic scorekeeping," for example, is a general conception of an interactive field of performances. The model suggests that each participant's performances implicitly track from her own perspective the commitments and entitlements accrued by the various participants, such that each

5. I adapt this example from Wheeler (2000, chap. 6).

subsequent performance affects the significance of other performances by changing the score. Such a conception can be applied more generally, however. Foucault's (1982) conception of power, as "a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately upon others, [but] instead acts upon their actions" (p. 220) is one prominent example that takes such an interactive account of practices beyond the narrowly discursive realm. The result is a conception of practices whose performances are integrated within the practice not by a shared semantic content or behavioral similarity but by complex relations of mutual interaction.

By itself, however, a network of mutually interactive performances is not yet normative and hence not yet identifiable as a practice. A second crucial feature of practices, normatively conceived, is that these patterns of interaction constitute something at issue and at stake in their outcome. MacIntyre (1980) provides a useful illustration of this point: "If I am a Jew, I have to recognize that the tradition of Judaism is partly constituted by a continuous argument over what it means to be a Jew" (p. 62). Judaism, like any other significant tradition, exhibits no elements shared throughout its history. What it is to be a Jew is instead at issue in the practices of Judaism in all their historical complexity; what is at stake in those practices is the difference it would make to resolve the issue one way rather than another. But that difference is not already settled, and there is no agreed-upon formulation of what the issues and stakes are. Working out what is at issue in these practices and how the resolution of that issue matters is what the practice is about.

Most philosophical conceptions of normativity nevertheless presume that there must be some determinate norms that already govern the performances accountable to them and thus that already settle what is at stake in their encompassing practices. Such conceptions might allow for epistemic uncertainty about these norms on the part of practitioners. Normative practice theories, however, take the issues and stakes in practices to be not merely subject to epistemic uncertainty, but perspectively variant or open-textured, and this amounts to a third crucial feature of their conception of practices. Brandom (1994) again serves as a good example. He characterizes the normativity and semantic contentfulness of discursive practices in terms of the essentially perspectival objectivity of conceptual norms:

Each perspective is at most *locally* privileged in that it incorporates a structural distinction between objectively correct applications of concepts and applications that are merely subjectively taken to be correct. . . . Sorting out who *should* be counted as correct, whose claims and applications of concepts

should be treated as authoritative, is a messy retail business. . . . [T]here is no bird's-eye view above the fray of competing claims from which those that deserve to prevail can be identified. . . . (Pp. 600, 601, my italics)

Foucault (1978) likewise rejects any “sovereign” standpoint “above the fray” from which competing political or epistemic claims can be definitively assessed, colorfully expressed by the claim that “in political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king” (pp. 88-89).<sup>6</sup>

On such accounts, the normativity of practices is expressed not by a determinate norm to which they are accountable but instead in the mutual accountability of their constitutive performances to issues and stakes whose definitive resolution is always prospective. Indeed, that is the point of introducing the phrases “at issue” and “at stake.” Performances of a practice are intentionally directed toward and accountable to “something” (an issue and what is at stake in that issue) that outruns any particular expression of what it is. To be sure, we often make explicit judgments about what is at stake in various practices. Such judgments, however, are typically efforts to express what is already at issue and at stake in the practice. Moreover, we make such judgments while also acknowledging that alternative, inconsistent formulations are also attempts to formulate the same issue or stakes. Efforts to stand outside of an ongoing practice and definitively identify the norms that govern its performances are assimilated within the practice itself as one more contribution to shaping what it will become and how that future matters to present performance. Arthur Fine (1986) nicely summarized this point in the case of scientific practice:

If science is a performance, then it is one where the audience and crew play as well. Directions for interpretation are also part of the act. If there are questions and conjectures about the meaning of this or that, or its purpose, then there is room for those in the production too. The script, moreover, is never finished, and no past dialogue can fix future action. Such a performance . . . picks out its own interpretations, locally, as it goes along. (P. 148)

Normativity on such a conception is an essentially temporal phenomenon. It amounts to a mutual interactive accountability toward a future that encompasses present circumstances within its past.

There is one final point that needs to be addressed, however, before we have a clear sense of the conception of practices and normativity that I am putting forward. Conceptions of social practice and of normativity as constituted

6. For further explication of this reading of Foucault, see Rouse (1996, 2005).

within social practice are often criticized for a tendency toward some form of idealism. On such conceptions, social practices may have an internal coherence that is bereft of any connection to the world. Sometimes, such criticisms are well founded. I have argued in *How Scientific Practices Matter* (Rouse 2002), for example, that John McDowell (1994) is ultimately correct to criticize Davidson for understanding language and belief in ways that could only amount to a “frictionless spinning in a void,” even though McDowell’s own arguments against Davidson are not yet sufficient to show why this is so. Turner (1994) has expressed similar worries about the account of normativity that I am offering here. He argues that such a conception of normative accountability is merely “instrumentalist” and that it cannot satisfy “the need to connect the stuff of thought to the world of cause and substance” (p. 37).

This criticism is fundamentally misplaced when directed toward a normative conception of practices, however, for it inserts a divide between thought and reality or social practice and causal interaction where none is to be found. Participants in practices are bodily beings who are already part of the “world of cause and substance.” When I talk about performances of a practice, I am not referring to something ethereal but to ongoing patterns of causal intra-action within partially shared circumstances. Understanding the performances of other participants in practices cannot be separated from understanding the circumstances in which those performances take place. Indeed, it is better not to separate the performance from the circumstances in the first place. A principal point of the practice idiom is to incorporate an agent’s performances and the circumstances in which it occurs as part of a single complex phenomenon.

But the reverse point is equally crucial. Not only do practices reach out to include their circumstances; linguistic and other practices are always an integral part of the circumstances in which human beings are situated. Turner’s criticism tacitly assumes that linguistic meaning and other forms of normative accountability are grasped psychologically, in a domain of mental representation (“the stuff of thought”) that is somehow separate from and intermediate between body and world. But language is not primarily “in the head,” the mind, thought, or “the space of reasons.” Linguistic utterances and marks are right out there in the world. Indeed, they are among the most pervasive and salient features of the world in which we find ourselves. The interconnected abilities to recognize and produce such sounds, marks, and gestures are likewise among the most basic human causal capacities. Note well, however, that even at this most basic phonemic and graphemic level of linguistic performance, we are not talking about regularities but instead about complex patterns of mutual responsiveness. The linguists remind us

that phonemes cannot be identified as regularities in the production and recognition of sounds but only as more complex patterns of uptake and response—part of what constitutes an utterance as composed of one set of phonemes rather than another is its appropriate uptake within an ongoing linguistic practice.

So to Turner's worry about how we get from the stuff of thought to the world of cause and substance, I respond that he has gotten the problem exactly backwards. Language and other social practices are first and foremost bodily capacities for intra-action in shared circumstances.<sup>7</sup> We do not first grasp meanings in the head and then try to attach them to publicly recognizable marks. We instead develop our bodily capacities for responsive intra-action. From those articulative capacities and our shared vulnerability and neediness, languages and other social practices become pervasive features of our world. Our participation in those practices enables us to become the agents we are through our mutual accountability to the possibilities those practices make available and to what is thereby at stake for us in how we respond to those possibilities.

To recapitulate, so far I have simply given a brief exposition of a normative conception of practices and how it might be understood as a conception of normativity more generally. On this account, normativity is not to be expressed in terms of governance by rules or de facto regularities in a community's behavior, values, or preferences. Normativity instead involves a complex pattern of interrelations among performances through time.<sup>8</sup> Such performances are normative when they are directed toward one another as mutually accountable to common stakes, albeit stakes whose correct formulation is always at issue within the practice. The crucial question, however, is why we should accept such a construal of normativity.

In *How Scientific Practices Matter* (Rouse 2002), I have tried to answer that question through reflection on what it means to be a philosophical naturalist. There, I argued that most familiar conceptions of normativity presuppose a dualistic conception of nature and the normative that makes unintelligible both the place of norms in nature and the normative authority

7. I take the term "intra-action" from Barad (2007). The point, which I discuss more extensively in Rouse (2002), is reject the connotation that an "interaction" has interacting components that can be identified apart from the mutual interaction.

8. Ultimately, time and temporality must also be understood within the idiom of practices rather than situating practices within an independently determined temporal metric. Both the constitution of practices and norms for measuring temporal increments and the timing and historicity of such practices in turn need more extensive analysis. This topic is far beyond the scope of this article.

of the scientific practices that give us a conception of nature in which to place them. I also tried to show how a normative conception of practices avoids such dualisms and allows for an appropriately naturalistic understanding of normativity, including the normativity of scientific practices. That is a long and complex story, however. My brief response to Turner's worries about instrumentalism is one small part of that story, but for a fuller account, I can only refer readers to the last half of the book (Rouse 2002, chap. 5-9).

I shall instead conclude by mentioning two other distinct advantages to conceiving normativity in terms of how we hold one another accountable to what is at issue and at stake in ongoing practices. The first and perhaps most important advantage is that it avoids a widespread and misleading theoretical temptation to posit underlying unity as a condition of understanding. Nietzsche (1954) described this temptation with characteristic force and cogency:

The philosophers think they show their respect for a subject when they dehistoricize it, when they turn it into a mummy. . . . When these honorable idolators of concepts worship something, they kill it and stuff it; they threaten the life of everything they worship. Death, change, old age, as well as procreation and growth, are to their minds objections, even refutations. (P. 479)

Philosophers have not been alone in succumbing to the temptation to posit stable meanings, rules, norms, patterns, or presuppositions underlying the manifest diversity of social life. Traditional conceptions of culture in anthropology or of structures and norms in sociology exemplify a similar tendency to identify understanding with repetition of the Sacred Image of the Same (Haraway 1997). To see what a normative conception of practices looks like in the social sciences, on the other hand, one good place to look would be recent anthropological theory, in which the study of diverse, interactive cultural practices has often dispensed with unified conceptions of culture.<sup>9</sup>

9. The article that canonically identifies and articulates anthropologists' initial turn from a conception of relatively stable, unifying, and undifferentiated cultures to a more dynamic account of cultural practices is Ortner (1984). A distinctive feature of the anthropological literature on practices is its recurrent emphasis on situating cultural meaning within the dynamics of political economy. For some further discussions and extensions of the practice idiom within anthropological theory, see Sahlins (2000), Ortner and Dirks (1994), Dirks (1998), and Ong (1999). Thanks to Elizabeth Traube for suggestions of and conversation about these references. My own familiarity with these themes in anthropology is primarily drawn from recent work in anthropological science studies; some prominent examples of that work include Strathern (1992), Martin (1994), Rabinow (1996), Downey and Dumit (1997), and Goodman, Heath, and Lindee (2003).

A second advantage to such a conception arises from its understanding of how the efforts of philosophers and social theorists to express and criticize norms acquire authority and force. There is no special domain of rules, norms, values, transcendental conditions, natural law, or any other grounds to which philosophers or anyone else has distinctive access. Critical reflection on meaning, knowledge, or social life instead arises from within our practices of communication, understanding, production and exchange, and governance, that is, from the midst of our complex causal intra-actions in partly shared circumstances. Such reflections attempt to express what is already at issue and at stake in those practices, and they are accountable to the very issues and stakes they seek to articulate. There is no god's-eye view that offers a definitive standpoint from which to discern what those stakes really are. There are only ongoing efforts to forge a viable future together from within a shared but contested past and present.

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