Practical Reason and Social Practices

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1. Introduction

My interest in practical reason is an outsider's interest. I am not a moral theorist or an epistemologist engaged in inquiry about reasons or rationality. In fact, I've been known to participate in good-natured ribbing about such work (but, I admit, it is a very fine line between good-natured ribbing and bad-natured ribbing (as my husband, Steve, has been known to say)). But I sometimes find it useful to see my own work from an outsider's perspective: it can push me to identify and clarify assumptions that are shared by others working in the area but not outside of it; it can offer me insights into issues that I had skated over or deferred; and it can build bridges to other literatures that expand the scope of my thinking. I hope that my contribution here can do some of the same.[1]

According to a dominant model in analytic social ontology – one that plays a role in analytic philosophy from philosophy of mind, through epistemology, to ethics – the social world consists of psychologically sophisticated individuals who form intentions (consciously or unconsciously) to act. They reflect on their own beliefs, desires, or preferences, perform some sort of calculation or weighing, and unless they suffer akrasia, perform accordingly. Sometimes they act together, or at least coordinate, under conditions of common knowledge. Sometimes they share knowledge by giving testimony, or disagree with each other. Usually they say what they mean and mean what they say in a context of cooperative communication. They design practices for particular purposes and enact them for reasons. When problems arise, they must have made a factual or moral error, or made a mistake in weighing their reasons. (See, e.g., Lewis 1969; Gilbert 1989; Bratman 1992.)

I don't deny that this is part of what goes on in the social world, but in order to engage in the mental activity required for this picture we must already have quite sophisticated cognitive and linguistic capacities that include a rich supply of concepts. We must already participate forms of interaction that enable us to make plausible interpretive hypotheses about others and that form a basis for coordination. Although some kinds of cognitive selection and patterns of interaction are hardwired in humans, there must also be forms of sociality prior to sharing intentions to take a walk (Gilbert 1989) or paint a house (Bratman 1992). Sociality does not begin with joint intentions, or the like, because our embeddedness in the social world is a precondition for even having most of our everyday intentions in the first place. These more basic forms of sociality are where we might find the sources of our practical orientations; they are the social preconditions for much of our thinking and acting.

In this essay, I will sketch two ways in which practical reason is socially conditioned, corresponding to two ways of approaching practical reason: (i) as a human capacity for deliberation, (ii) as a normative structure. With respect to (i): most human reasoning makes use of tools that are provided by culture. The tools include language, concepts, default patterns of inference, and shared background assumptions. These tools are not simply tools for explanation and prediction, nor are they simply tools to enable us to get what we want; they are tools for coordination with others. Some of these tools are defective and leave us with unjust forms of coordination, ignorance about what's valuable, and paradoxes of agency. With respect to (ii): most coordination with others depends on there being social practices that

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[1] Throughout this essay I draw on previous work. See Haslanger 2017; 2018; forthcoming.

give form to our interactions; these practices also give us reasons and shape our identities. As a result, whether or not something is a good or sufficient reason for action often cannot be determined without understanding the local practices that give the action meaning and play a crucial role in affecting its consequences. Tensions between practical normativity and moral normativity are well-known. But the proper role and sources of social normativity – the normativity arising from participation in practices that enable and constrain social coordination – is often neglected. Of course, there is work on practical reason that fully embraces one or both of these main points (e.g., Brandom 1994, 2000; Gatens 1998; Mills 1998b; Laden 2012).[2] However, I hope that my discussion below can point to ways in which there are important questions about practical reason that deserve further attention, and that those working in social philosophy can be part of the conversation.

2. Methodology, Motivation, and Non-ideal Theory

Why do facts about human sociality matter in thinking about practical reason? Suppose we grant that practical reasoning depends on our embeddedness in social practices that frame our thinking and acting. Even so, one might argue, the basic capacity for practical reason is surely innate, and the norms of practical reason are universal. Of course we develop abilities to reason depending on socialization; and some practices of reasoning have historical and cultural roots, e.g., reasoning by reference to authority, such as the Bible or the law. But a philosophical inquiry into practical reason need not concern itself with such particulars, for the properly philosophical concern is with a more abstract form of both moral psychology and the normative structure of practical thought. Why, then, should we be concerned with the background social context?

In social/political philosophy, there has been an ongoing debate about the value of ideal theory (e.g., Mills 1997, 1998a, 2005; Sen 2006; Swift 2008; Robeyns 2008; Anderson 2010, Appiah 2017). There are many forms of this debate, but for our purposes, we can focus on two questions: (i) Should philosophical inquiry begin by considering idealized cases, selecting and abstracting from the broad range of complex and concrete phenomena which prompt our inquiry? (ii) Should philosophers aim to capture a normative ideal towards which we should be aiming (and should we undertake rectification as a process leading to that ideal)? Sometimes these two questions interact, e.g., if one assumes that the ideal can be discovered only by considering idealized cases. For example, ideal theorists in political theory argue that we need to know what justice is in order to remedy current injustice; and in order to know what justice is, we must abstract away from the messy reality of our lives and understand the source and site of justice in idealized cases. (A further assumption often made is that this can be done a priori.) As Adam Swift puts it, "only by reference to philosophy – abstract, pure, context-free philosophy – can we have an adequate basis for thinking how to promote justice in our current, radically nonideal, circumstances." (2008, 382)

In recent years, the issue of ideal theory has also been raised in other philosophical domains as well. For example, in philosophy of language the question arises whether we should begin theorizing with cooperative communication as the default assumption (understanding uncooperative communication in its terms, treating it as a defective case), and should we model ideal languages and take their features to be normative for natural language (e.g., Langton 1993; McKinney 2016). Parallel questions also arise in

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[2] These references are intended as representative only, for much of feminist and critical race theory over the past four decades has explored the ways in which reasons and reasoning are socially conditioned. This is also an important theme in "Continental" philosophy since Hegel. Work in analytic moral psychology and ethics has mostly (and shamefully) ignored these literatures.

epistemology (e.g., Fricker 2007, Sullivan and Tuana 2007). And the answer to such questions has increasingly been no, or not always. I, myself, find that the project of nonideal philosophy more effectively answers questions that I care most about. But we need not, as a discipline, make a choice; we can reasonably ask different questions calling for different methodologies. And hopefully, we can collaborate in working out the big picture.

Historically, the project of analytic philosophy has employed a method of beginning with clear and simple cases to get a grip on the phenomenon, and then build up from there. Those who are dubious of this approach worry that the clear and simple cases are often not the central phenomena to be understood, and the tools we develop to understand them are inadequate and cannot simply be expanded or permuted to understand the phenomenon as a whole. A related worry is that what are in fact central, though complex, phenomena, are pushed aside and downgraded as unimportant or to be addressed "later" (when we have the theory worked out!). Moreover, the selection of the clear and simple cases often seems to be biased towards cases that particular socially situated (dominant) inquirers find compelling or familiar, e.g., consider the invisibility of care work in most political philosophy. And finally, it seems methodologically questionable to develop theory using mainly a priori methods and then think it can be simply applied as needed, e.g., as if so-called "applied" ethics can be done by just adding empirical details to utilitarianism or deontology.

Inquiry begins with a question. Of course there are many kinds of legitimate questions. But one set of legitimate questions concerns how we might solve a specific problem facing us, a problem that has arisen in our interaction with the world, or with each other, or through self-reflection. To solve such problems, idealized examples and ideal theory are neither necessary, nor particularly helpful: we need to understand the complexity of the particular situation that faces us to diagnose the problem (also drawing on empirical inquiry), we can make progress in solving the problem without knowing what the ideal is, and attempting to implement an ideal when the circumstances and agents are far from ideal, is often a mistake.

One source of the problem with ideal theory is that when we think of humans "in the abstract," it is tempting to begin with a single person. They have a body and a mind, and are capable of using the mind to move the body to perform actions. Of course, humans live with others and an individual's action affects the lives of others. So we should be attentive to this interaction in understanding and evaluating individual actions in relation to others. But this abstraction is inadequate, at least for some purposes. For example, if our guiding question concerns the terms on which we should organize life together, and if we begin with the singleton agent with capacities for deliberative thought, and agency (including motor skills), then very young children, some of the disabled and elderly, and non-human animals, are left as afterthoughts (Nussbaum 2006). If the bodies and the histories of the abstract agents are washed out as well, then reproductive and sexual differences, historical injustices, and material conditions are occluded. This is not to say that we cannot learn from philosophical exercises that focus on idealized abstract humans. But for many of us, it is at the very least unclear how to apply those lessons to the problems that motivate our inquiry, for we are not trying to understand how abstract humans might organize themselves. We want to solve problems that arise in organizing our lives together here and now.

Critical social theory is a form of nonideal theory that begins inquiry with problems arising in nonideal circumstances and in resistance to injustice. For example, one pressing concern is why even thoughtful and well-meaning people act in ways that contribute to injustice – and do so in ways that perpetuate their own subordination or the subordination of those they love. Surely, most of us are not

knowingly and intentionally dominating others or allowing ourselves to be dominated. Yet this happens nonetheless. A rather straightforward example is the division of labor in the household, i.e., women's "second shift" (Hochschild 2003). Even those who are conscientiously egalitarian and even feminist in their politics live in ways that burden women with housework, childcare, eldercare, care of the sick and disabled, that far exceeds their fair share. Why do we continue to do this? We are not ignorant or morally corrupt, at least not in any straightforward sense. On some accounts of practical reason, it is not obvious how to analyze or evaluate such action. Are oppressed individuals not being appropriately responsive to reasons? How should we weigh the reasons one has to participate in unjust systems of coordination, especially if an unjust system is the only one available? What are we to make of desires – and conceptions of the good – that are formed under such conditions?

One way of capturing this problem is in terms of *ideology*. Stuart Hall suggests that ideology

...has especially to do with the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilize a particular form of power and domination; or which reconcile and accommodate the mass of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation. (Hall 1996/2006, 24-25)

The first challenge of a theory of ideology is to understand how we, collectively and voluntarily, enact social structures. The more specific, and more pressing question is how, without being coerced, we come to enact oppressive social structures. Of course, not all oppression or injustice is ideological: "a whole number of other factors…can play an important role…, from selectively applied repression via coordination and cooperation problems in the face of massive power asymmetries to the 'pathologies' and paradoxes of collective action" (Celitakes 2016, 20). Ideology, nevertheless, is a kind of barrier to social justice, one that ultimately affects our agency "from within."[3] It is tempting to say that ideology creates an epistemic barrier, but it is more than that, for it affects not only our perception and belief formation, but a wide range of affective, conative, and hedonic states and processes, and bodily dispositions (Railton 2014).

I will use the term "practical orientation" for the shared (or coordinated), often unconscious, broadly psychological dispositions that enable us to engage with the world (including other agents) around us. On my view, an ideology is, as Hall suggests, a set of social meanings – public symbols, scripts, and other cultural tools – that we internalize and use to frame our thought and action and, moreover, systematically sustains injustice.[4] An individual's practical orientation is ideological to the extent that it is shaped by cultural tools that – in a particular context – produce or sustain injustice. Such practical orientations will involve a kind of reason-responsiveness (Mantel 2018, Lord 2018). But because our practical orientations are shaped by ideology and under conditions of injustice, they are liable to structural distortion. The critical theorist, then, begins with practical questions such as: What parts of my practical orientation (and the orientations of others) can I trust? How do structures of injustice colonize our thoughtful and well-intentioned engagements with each other and the world? The starting point of

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[3] For more on the construction of "docile" subjects (though not employing the terminology of 'ideology') see Foucault 1979; Bartky 1990.

[4] Note that theorists use the term 'ideology' in many different ways. There is, for example, a pejorative or non-pejorative sense (Geuss 1981). In a non-pejorative sense, ideology guides our participation in social practices, whether just or unjust. In the pejorative sense, the term is used as part of an explanation of how unjust and oppressive social structures are stabilized and sustained: it is an attempt to illuminate how our agency has been colonized. It may be that there is not just one kind of thing going wrong in the variety of different cases. But the hypothesis is that there is a meaningful difference between practical orientations that systematically sustain injustice and those that don't, and the former are ideological. In recent years (since ~2015?), I use the term in the pejorative sense.

inquiry is not an abstract agent, but individuals with minds and bodies that have been shaped by interactions with others and whose actions are meaningful primarily within social practices.

In the next section, I will sketch an approach to culture that illuminates how culture might play an essential role in our practical orientations. I will then turn to consider briefly how social practices draw on culture to enable us to coordinate, and in doing so, give us reasons to act. I am not arguing, however, that all reasons are dependent on practices, or that reasons are necessarily constituted within practices. On my view, practices not only provide reasons, but also occlude them. Ideology distorts our practical orientation both by shaping the possibilities of coordination on unjust terms, and also by *preventing* us from recognizing what is morally valuable and imagining coordination on better terms. Some reasons are not (easily) epistemically accessible from within our practices; it is only through challenges to the practice that we gain access to them. I will conclude by making some of the connections between these ideas and practical reason more explicit.

3. Culture: Giving Shape and Content to Our Thinking

The term 'culture' has been highly contested in the social sciences and humanities for decades. What counts as culture, or a culture, is not only a descriptively challenging question, but is also normatively laden. Is there are meaningful notion of culture that we can draw on in thinking about practical reason?

One concern is that there are plausibly two different notions of culture, and eliding them has politically problematic effects (Appiah 2016). On the *Tylorian* conception, culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man (sic) as a member of society." (Tylor, quoted in Appiah 2016, 2). On the *Arnoldian* conception, culture is*: "a moral and aesthetic ideal, which found expression in art and literature and music and philosophy." (Appiah 2016, 2) The Arnoldian conception focuses on what is sometimes called "high culture," as opposed to "popular culture." When we speak of culture in this sense, we typically use the singular: culture is what artists and humanists, as opposed to what engineers or builders, or inventors, create. If we assume that to have a culture is to have the "high" culture of (European) elites, then the rest of us are downgraded to (more or less) barbarians.

Another concern with the concept of *culture* is that its employment too easily gives rise to a kind of cultural relativism. On the Tylorian conception, we are members of a society by virtue of internalizing its culture. On a strong version of the Tylorian view, we become who we are by virtue of internalizing the norms and values of our society's culture and we cannot truly understand the norms and values of a culture that we haven't internalized. Values and norms can be appreciated only "from the inside," i.e., from practitioners. From this, two conclusions seem to follow: (i) we cannot fully understand members of other cultures, and (ii) critique misfires, since there is no neutral standard – no values or set of norms – that can provide a basis for critique. One need not accept this strong (one might say, hegemonic) version of Tylorianism. Societies are fragmented and have multiple, often conflicting, sets of social meanings; navigating the (contemporary) social world involves code-switching and shaping.

Contemporary social theorists reject both the Tylorian and Arnoldian conceptions of culture and rely instead on a much more fragmented, pragmatic, polyvocal, and creolized conception of culture. Begin with the idea that any human behavior is conditioned by multiple factors. Suppose we are hungry and look for food. We might ask different questions about such a sequence of behavior, and find different

factors relevant, e.g., the *physical* demands of the human body; the *geographical* context and the edible things in it; the *social/political context* that makes certain edibles salient and available; the *economic constraints* on what the individual(s) can afford; or the *social meaning* of the different foodstuffs: do we go for a burger and French fries or Buddha's delight? Within any such sequence of behavior, physical and cultural processes interact with each other and "[such] interaction is only one of the many ways in which the cultural forms part of and is continuous with the natural world" (Balkin 1998, 5).

Social meanings are captured and expressed in language, but not just in language. We recognize and respond to a broad range of symbols, signs, statuses, (etc.) and navigate the world with default assumptions (what some might consider analytic or quasi-analytic truths) that shape our engagement with each other and the non-human world. Understanding semiotic relations as relations in a holistic web of meanings, William Sewell (2005) suggests:

> …culture is not a coherent system of symbols and meanings but a diverse collection of "tools" that, as the metaphor indicates, are to be understood as means for the performance of action. Because these tools are discrete, local, and intended for specific purposes, they can be deployed as explanatory variables in a way that culture conceived as a translocal, generalized system of meanings cannot. (46)

> It is important to note that the network of semiotic relations that make up culture is not isomorphic with the network of economic, political, geographical, social, or demographic relations that make up what we usually call a "society." A given symbol [e.g.,] mother, red, polyester, liberty, wage labor, or dirt, is likely to show up not only in many different locations in a particular institutional domain (motherhood in millions of families) but in a variety of different institutional domains as well (welfare mothers as a potent political symbol, the mother tongue in linguistic quarrels, the Mother of God in the Catholic Church). (49)

So on this Sewellian account, culture is a set of tools that human and some non-human agents employ in thinking and acting (see also Balkin 1998, Ch. 1, Lessig 1995). Some tools are simple meanings (pink means girl, red means stop); some are narrative tropes ("First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage"); some are default assumptions ("Marriage is between one man and one woman") or heuristics (imitate-the-majority, or imitate-the-successful (Hertwig et al 2013, 7; Gigerenzer et al 1999); some are familiar patterns of metaphor and metonymy ("Juliet is the sun," "The pen is mightier than the sword," Camp 2006); some are entrenched conceptual homologies (reason/passion, man/woman, black/white (Balkin 1998, Ch. 10; Balkin 1990). These tools form complex but fragmented and negotiated networks of meaning. I share some cultural tools with philosophical colleagues across the globe, others with my neighbors, and still others with my dogs. The public meanings are internalized as we learn the "languages" of our local cultures; this is the basis for our fluency in social skills and capacities for code-switching. Furthermore, there are forms of thinking, feeling, and acting that do not require culture – some individuals cannot access most cultural tools due to their cognitive differences; and sometimes we can rely on what Grice called "natural" meanings. But culture is important, one might even argue essential, for broad human coordination.

If we accept the idea of culture as a set of tools, then some of the risks of the Tylorian and Arnoldian conceptions are diminished. Culture is not a unified and coherent system; we engage in different practices with different communities (at work, at home, at leisure, in religious communities) that require different semiotic tools and different background assumptions. Tools that are designed for one

purpose are used for other purposes and can be used for coordination or critique. Moreover, one's culture doesn't "determine" what one does (in a way that compromises autonomy) any more than one's language determines what propositions one expresses. But culture provides substantial content for our mindedness, and its contribution is aptly subject to critique, for this is one site where ideology can infiltrate our lives by shaping not only beliefs (and patterns of ignorance), but the full range of human responsiveness, including desires, emotions, preferences, perception, habits, dispositions, and the like.[5] Insofar as practical reason guides us in navigating the social realm and coordinating with others, we cannot avoid drawing on the resources – good or bad – that culture provides.

4. Social Practices

In the previous section, I argued that culture shapes our responsiveness to things; it does so by providing us a set of tools for interpreting and engaging the world, and by creating a set of (fragmented, dynamic, context-sensitive) frameworks of intelligibility. It is crucial for these tools and frameworks to be public and shared, for they form the basis for coordination. Coordination around *resources*, i.e., things of (+/-) value, is a fundamental human task, and our ability to develop flexible forms of coordination that can be passed down through social learning is the key to our evolutionary success (Sterelny 2012). Coordination is embodied in social practices. On the account I favor, social practices are patterns of learned behavior that, at least in the primary instances, enable us to coordinate as members of a group in creating, distributing, managing, maintaining, and eliminating a resource (or multiple resources), due to mutual responsiveness to each other's behavior and the resource(s) in question, as interpreted through shared meanings/cultural schemas.[6] The cultural schemas/meanings are the tools provided by culture that I discussed in the previous section.

In the philosophical literature on practices, there is a common assumption that social practices are rule-governed patterns of behavior. Although I do not share this assumption (on my view, only some practices are, strictly speaking, rule-governed), insights from this literature are valuable for elaborating the social embeddedness of practical reason. In 'Two Concepts of Rules' (1995), Rawls argues that practices (such as promising) are defined by a set of rules that are *logically prior to* the behavior and states of mind of the participants. The practices render our action meaningful. Standard examples of this include games: one cannot score a soccer goal without there being a set of rules that constitute soccer and an occasion in which the game is being played (and performing certain behavior counts as a play in the game, whether one intended it to or not). Practices also constitute reasons for action: Jozy Altidore has reason to pass the ball to a teammate or into the goal, and not touch the ball with his hands, because this is what soccer requires. Commitment to the game, and to his team, has broader consequences in his life and gives him

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[5] Fricker (2007) has drawn attention to a related issue of *hermeneutical injustice*. On Fricker's view, however, hermeneutical injustice is treated as a harm to an individual by virtue of a lack of a hermeneutical resource. The phenomenon I have in mind is more structural and productive. Our capacity for social agency presupposes, as Rawls (1955) would say, a "stage setting for action." What I can do and who I can be depends on the communicative and interpretive resources that culture provides.

[6] I explicate and defend this view in Haslanger 2018. The view, as I understand it, presumes value pluralism (see Anderson 1993). Note that I am concerned with *social* practices; in principle, a pattern in an individual's behavior may be a practice, but not a social practice.

reason to practice, to travel to certain destinations, to manage his diet and other activities (Chang 2013). Such actions may be constitutive of his identity, who he is.[7]

Once we recognize that at least some reasons are practice-dependent, there will be many cases in which we cannot evaluate an agent's reason for action without understanding the social context.[8] As Tamar Schapiro has pointed out,

> Because the actions falling under practice rules are logically constituted by those rules, such actions can only be justified by being shown to be in accordance with those rules. To justify a move by showing its conformity to some standard that is independent of the game is to justify it as some other, practice-independent form of behavior, rather than as the move that it is. (Schapiro 2003, 335)

Of course, the practice itself may call for justification, and such justification may rely on practice-independent standards such as utility. (And evaluating practices is itself a practice!) However, as long as one remains a participant in the practice – and for many practices and roles, simply choosing to opt out is not an option – the rules of the practice are a source of reasons; and we can do better or worse, with more or less justification, even in deeply problematic practices. How do we adjudicate the weight of practice-dependent reasons and the weight of reasons for the practice? For example, if we simply assume that reasons for or against *A-ing* are given by the constitutive standards of the practice within which *A-ing* occurs, then it is not clear how to accommodate systematic critique.[9]

For example, in the context of social roles, we are often put in a position of a forced choice. As a professor, you must assign your students a grade. The grading system is given. You can decide on the method and standards for assigning grades, but you are not in control of what grades are available or their meanings. You can choose not to assign a grade, but that too has a meaning and consequences for the student. In a forced choice, both action and inaction have significance, so there is no way to avoid a move in the practice. In choosing how to act, the structure of the practice shapes my reasons. I give Genae an A, because those who perform excellently in all components of evaluation should be assigned an A, and she met this standard. This is the grade I ought to give her.

Social practices, however, interact in complicated ways. Recently I was at an Institute-wide curriculum retreat in which we discussed grading systems. It was pointed out that in most science classes at MIT, an A grade is rare and is reserved for only exceptional students (and there are no + or – options, so the next grade below A is a B). However, to get into a good medical school, students need to have an A average in their science classes; a B average is insufficient. So the MIT grading system effectively prevents many very qualified and capable MIT students from going to medical school. This prompted a valuable discussion about the purpose of grades and how the multiple purposes might be best achieved. What

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[7] Games are not the only, or even the best, examples. Not all practices are constituted by rules; we do not always engage in all practices consciously and deliberatively; and what practice my action instantiates is not just up to me or my intentions. (See Rebecca Kukla and Marc Lance 2014).

[8] Recall that I am not arguing that all reasons are practice-dependent. For example, practices can shape our practical orientations so that it is difficult, if not impossible, to recognize reasons to oppose the practice, or to do things very differently.

[9] For example, consider Schroeder (2010, 13): "According to this account, the distinction between the right and wrong kind of reasons is relative to an 'activity'. This is because the point of the distinction between the 'right' and 'wrong' kinds of reasons, is that only the 'right' kind contribute to standards of correctness, and standards of correctness are relative to activities." Thanks to Kurt Sylvan for directing me to Schroeder's paper.

practice would be best? And what, under the current system, should a responsible professor do? Would a professor who gives every passing student an A be fulfilling their responsibilities? As you might expect there was much disagreement and debate, and no resolution.

This would appear to be a case of overlapping practices: there is a local practice of grading that enables faculty at MIT to coordinate, to motivate their students, and to treat them fairly. There is a broader practice of using grades for assessment that extends to other professional contexts. There are different goals amongst the institutions, different practical orientations amongst the students, teachers, and administrators. And there is a background (though contested) assumption of meritocracy. Note, however, that in order for any of the broad goals to be achieved, a practice must be put in place that will enable assessment and sharing of relevant information. The idea that there is a correct grade for a student, apart from a set of practices that interprets and employs the information conventionally encoded, is like saying that there is a correct word for a two wheeled vehicle, apart from any language. In effect, there is no reason for someone to assign an A, a B, or a C, without a set of practices and conventions that use the grade assignment to enable coordination. There are many acceptable ways to set up such practices. And even if the form of coordination is less than ideal, a participant in the practice will have reason to conform to it because it may be the only means of coordination available.

Shapiro explores the form that practices take under nonideal conditions. There are several ways that conditions may be nonideal in a cooperative practice. Consider a practice involving the coordination of two individuals (she uses the practice of negotiation as a paradigm). (i) One's co-participant may sincerely participate in the practice but frustrate its ends by failing to do their part effectively or responsibly, e.g., they may do it too slowly, carelessly, without being fully aware of their role, etc. Schapiro would call one's action in such a case *productively*-unsuccessful (337). (ii) One's co-participant can fail to meet the constitutive conditions of the practice, e.g., they may not undertake it sincerely, or may lie about having met the preconditions. This would be a case where one's action is *constitutively*-unsuccessful. Due to the misdeed(s) of the other, the practice, Schapiro suggests, becomes a sham. (iii) One's co-participant may *subvert* the practice, making it the case that by playing one's part, one does not contribute to achieving its ends, but to something at odds with its ends; perhaps one contributes, unwillingly, to their ends. In such a case, one's participation conforms to the rules, but is at odds with the spirit of the practice, but the failure occurs by virtue of another's misdeed. (iv) One's co-participant can exploit your commitment to the practice for their own ends: even if all participants are committed to the end of the practice, your participation may have side-effects that another takes advantage of, e.g., your teammate may want to win the game as much as you do, but also take advantage of your exhaustion after a hard practice (when your willpower is low), to borrow money. The practice becomes a method for the co-participant to get you to do what he wants. (345)

As Schapiro points out, however, nonideal conditions are not just a matter of having an uncooperative partner in negotiation; the structure of rules and circumstances can effectively undermine one's agency in the same sorts of ways. For example, consider a double-bind:

> …because you are a participant [in the practice], you have to play, and because the rules are constitutive of participation, the only way to play is to play by the rules. But because the background conditions presupposed by such rules are ill established, playing by the rules fails to amount to participation in the relevant form of activity. As such, what is a conscientious player to do? If you comply with the letter of the law, you will betray its spirit, in the sense that you will not be engaging in the form of activity in terms of which you value yourself and your conduct as a

player. If you violate the letter of that law, however, you will likewise fail to participate in that form of activity, because there are no other rules in terms of which that activity is defined. (Schapiro 2003, 340)

Think back to the grading problem. A professor has to assign a grade, and to do so, must follow the rules. But the rules are not well-suited to achieve communication and coordination (given the gap between what an A means in different contexts); any strategy of assigning grades within the current system will succeed along one dimension but will fail along another (so betray the spirit(s) of the practice). But making up my own grading system will not work, because it won't constitute a basis for coordination on assessment – my idiosyncratic system of assigning say, Q, L, H, does not define a new social practice. The possibility of scenarios such as those listed above makes clear that we are not simply dependent on others to be efficient or productive in satisfying our desires or preferences, but that the constitutive possibility of action can depend not only on performing according to practice rules, but also on cooperative others and on the background social conditions. We might say that social normativity is a kind of normativity that derives from practices due to their (broadly) conventional means of facilitating (but not guaranteeing) coordination.[10]

In considering Rawls and Schapiro, I've assumed that practices are rule-governed and that we participate with others intentionally. Let's go back, however, to the idea that an individual's practical orientation is shaped by culture and that their social fluency in cooperative practices happens, for the most part, without thought or deliberation. Culture is not a set of rules (those who lack social skills are often excellent at following rules – knowing or acting on rules is not the problem). And culture shapes content of our mental lives, from perception, to intention, to inference. Let's grant, further, that in nonideal circumstances, culture engages us, systematically, in unjust systems, i.e., it is an ideology. We desire fashionable things at the cheapest price that are often produced by exploiting labor and the environment; we defer to the powerful; we avoid the discomfort of diverging from social scripts, and are anxious around (sometimes violent towards) those who seem to have different scripts. We try to follow the "letter of the law" but the law isn't written and we have to do the best we can with ambiguities and vagueness; even the spirit of the law is unclear, e.g., people not only wonder what etiquette requires, or even what the point of etiquette is (cf. Judith Martin 2005).

Under such nonideal conditions, looking for reasons for action or justifying actions one has performed is a messy business. In some cases it is difficult even to determine what action one has performed. Have the background conditions been met? Are others participating sincerely? Have they subverted the practice? Should you subvert the practice towards a better end? Is social engineering required (changing the practice) or is reform possible (bringing the practice in line with its proper end) (Schapiro 2003, 352)? I don't raise these question to answer them, but to complicate the examples that could be the subject matter for philosophical reflection.

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[10] On my view, not all conventions are conventions in Lewis's (1969) sense, and not all coordination is a solution to a formal coordination problem. The solutions may not be arbitrary; there may not be, in any meaningful sense, common knowledge among participants; the responses may not be rational or mutually advantageous. I am dubious, especially, that preferences should be our starting point. A meaningful sense of preference with respect to the resource in question may be constituted only through the practice that organizes our responses (Anderson 2001).

5. How, Again, is This Relevant to the Study of Practical Reason?

I've sketched a case for thinking that most agency, including rational agency, depends on being embedded in a culture, for culture provides basic tools for mindedness. As mentioned above, I am not immersed in the study of practical reason. However, as I understand the subject, a better understanding of the social context of agency might have something to contribute. For example:

i) What *are* reasons? How can we gain knowledge of reasons for action?

I have not provided an account of reasons. Some normative reasons are practice-dependent, e.g., I have reason to give my student an A for her excellent performance in class. But under nonideal conditions there may also be reasons to resist or reform the practice that do not derive from that practice or even other existing practices. The tools that our existing cultures provide for coordination are often defective: they deflect our attention from things that are morally and practically relevant, e.g., our interdependence with other species in an ecosystem; they distort our ability to detect or create value (think of the fetishism of the commodity). Practices we rely on for coordination impose social hierarchy (Tilly 1999). Practices not only create, shape, and make reasons vivid, they occlude them, prevent us from acting on them, and usurp our good intentions. We have some reason to participate in existing practices, even bad ones, for opting out can be costly, or impossible under conditions of forced choice. I would hope that studies of practical reason could help us sort through the challenges of living within unjust practices and illuminate the structural liability to structural dysfunction they impose.

How do we gain knowledge of reasons for action? Some knowledge we gain by becoming fluent participants in the practice. But, as noted, this is not good enough. Fortunately we are participants in many practices and can gain critical perspective on one practice from engaging in others. One might find reasons to resist traditional gendered practices at home by entering differently gendered practices in the workplace; open-minded travel to other cultures (which may be just "across the tracks"), is also important. Although I have not argued for it here, I believe that we can have first-person affective knowledge of reasons to resist domination.

ii) What capacities are central to being a rational agent? What capacities are central to being a moral agent? What is the relationship between deliberation and (moral, practical, etc.) action?

Many of us are capable of deliberation about how to act, but our participation in everyday practices is mostly routine and there is little resistance. We develop practical orientations – complex cognitive, affective, and agential dispositions – to respond to each other and the world around us. These practical orientations are deeply social: our thinking, feeling, and acting, are structured to coordinate with others in a particular milieu that has been shaped to facilitate that coordination.[11] We are not and have never been isolated individuals just trying to make it in the world.

Crucial to the success of our practical orientations is a complex set of social meanings that are publicly recognized and, if necessary, enforced. We have gendered pronouns, and gender is considered a deep and important fact about each of us. But the gender of an infant is not obvious. So we use colors to code infants' dress, bedding, toys, and other equipment; names and other bodily styling (such as earrings) also provide signals. The information such coding supplies enables us to integrate children "properly" into our gendered practices. We are fluent in reading the gendered signals (deliberation is not required), and respond with differential treatment. Failing to do so is considered rude, sometimes offensive. I would

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[11] On the importance of social niche construction, see Mameli 2004; Sterelny 2012; Zawidzki 2013.

argue that fluent participation in social practices of this sort is a form of rational agency, even if we are not conscious of the signals we are responding to, and even if the meaning of our action in a particular context is not (fully) under our control (Lessig 1995; Haslanger 2018). But the fact that we participate as rational agents in such practices does not render them (or us) immune from critique.

Work on practical reason might fruitfully engage with problems that emerge when our practical orientations are ideologically distorted. Under nonideal conditions, we are often just doing our best to coordinate with others on terms that they can interpret as meaningful. And this seems reasonable. But even if we become aware problems and distortions, often we cannot simply refuse to play. (We have to choose some pronoun, some words, some responses.) Yet, for many of us, we go against deep commitments in doing so. It is hard to discern what would be rational in such circumstances; or if rationality is a matter of acting to maximally satisfy our (socially conditioned) preferences, it is hard to see why rationality is a virtue.

iii) What is the normative structure of practical reason? How *ought* we reason when deliberating about how to act? What (perhaps retroactively or from an objective point of view) justifies an action? What makes an action reasonable?

I have not even sketched how one might develop a normative account of practical reason; instead I simply raised a series of questions that arise when agency is embedded in unjust social structures. I have assumed that social practices can provide reasons. I am obliged to keep (most of) my promises because that's what the practice of promise-keeping requires. I am obliged to thank my hosts for a lovely dinner and suggest that we must have them to our house soon, because that's what the practice of gift-giving (around here) requires. One might argue, however, that practices provide *normative* reasons only if they are themselves well-formed and warranted; and some practices only *seem to* provide us with normative reasons. But what does that evaluation entail? Our practices have complex histories and society does not provide us with a unified and coherent set of rules. Against what social and empirical background should we undertake the evaluation of a practice? Moreover, such a demand is overly restrictive. There are better and worse ways of going on, even when our systems of coordination are not well-established or create injustice.

For example, refusing common courtesy is not a transgressive act of courage, it is rude and disrespectful. As Judith Martin (N.d.) states:

> …serving as the language and currency of civility, etiquette reduces those inevitable frictions of everyday life that, unchecked, are increasingly erupting into the outbursts of private and public violence so readily evident in fractured families, stymied legislatures, drop-of-the-hat lawsuits, road rage, and other unwelcome by-products of a manners-free existence. These unpleasant developments have bred a nationwide call — from academics, politicians, writers of all stripes, and the public at large — for a return to common courtesy.

But participating in common courtesy may be a process of self-subordination, given the unjust systems some forms of courtesy are designed to protect. Ideological oppression exploits our motivation to engage in cooperative practices and depends on such double binds. Under such conditions we may need to subvert the practices, or at the very least, reform them. I would hope that research on practical reason could illuminate our agency within nonideal circumstances and offer tools to help us responsibly navigate the unjust and dysfunctional structures that we embody. Social norms are not arbitrary or optional, for

they provide the structure of life together, and we can't simply opt out of our form of life. But neither should we simply conform to their demands, for to do so is to become complicit in injustice.

Acknowledgements

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