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The Practical Turn[1]

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What is Practice Theory? What is a Practice?

What is "practice theory"? The best short answer is that it is any theory that treats practice as a fundamental category, or takes practices as its point of departure. Naturally, this answer leads to further questions. What is meant by "practices" here? What is involved in taking practices as a point of departure or a fundamental category, and what does that commitment amount to? And what is the point of the contrast between a practice-based theory and one that starts elsewhere?

Perhaps the most significant point of agreement among those who have taken the practical turn is that it offers a way out of Procustean yet seemingly inescapable categories, such as subject and object, representation and represented, conceptual scheme and content, belief and desire, structure and action, rules and their application, micro and macro, individual and totality. Instead, practice theorists propose that we start with practices and rethink our theories from the ground up. Bourdieu, for instance, insists that only a theory of practice can open up a way forward:

> Objective analysis of practical apprehension of the familiar world . . . teaches us that we shall escape from the ritual either/or choice between objectivism and subjectivism in which the social sciences have so far allowed themselves to be trapped only if we are prepared to inquire into the mode of production and functioning of the practical mastery which makes possible both an objectively intelligible practice and also an objectively enchanted experience of that practice. (Bourdieu 1977:2–3)

Two of the most important characteristics of the practical turn are a holism about meaning – a holism that serves to undermine traditional distinctions – and an emphasis on the importance of close attention to particular practices and the context within which they are located. But there is much less agreement as to how practices are to be understood, and precisely how practices provide the basis

for overcoming such entrenched distinctions. It would be only too easy for an unsympathetic critic to argue that practice theorists face a dilemma: either they remain tacitly committed to traditional categories, or they give them up at the price of failing to adopt any coherent position at all. Certainly these dangers do arise for the practice theorist who wishes to redraw familiar maps, or those who take the practical turn to lead us to give up maps in favor of investigating the landscape. But they are no reason to think that such a project cannot succeed.

What is a practice? No short answer will do here. At the very least, a practice is something people do, not just once, but on a regular basis. But it is more than just a disposition to behave in a certain way: the identity of a practice depends not only on what people do, but also on the significance of those actions and the surroundings in which they occur. This is only to begin to answer the question how we are to understand "what people do" when they are engaged in a practice, or just what a practice amounts to. For there are enormous differences among practice theorists on just this point, and the differences are far-reaching. Discussions of practice make use of several overlapping clusters of loosely connected and ambiguous terms, terms that suggest connections that lead in a number of different directions. These include: activity, praxis, performance, use, language-game, customs, habit, skill, know-how, equipment, habitus, tacit knowledge, presupposition, rule, norm, institution, paradigm, framework, tradition, conceptual scheme, worldview, background, and world-picture. One way of classifying practice theories is by looking at which terms are central to competing conceptions of practice. For instance, one could contrast individualistic with social conceptions, local with global, normative with descriptive, or implicit with explicit. But this would be doubly problematic. It would reintroduce at the very beginning just those dichotomies that practice theory problematizes, and it would not do justice to the fact that many of the terms in question are just as disputed as practice itself.

"Practice theory" can be an elusive expression to pin down. Taking practices as a point of departure does not require a commitment to any particular method, or any specific destination. As a result, "practice theorists" are an unusually diverse group. Talk of practices has become widespread, not only in the philosophy of social science, but throughout philosophy, the humanities, and the social sciences. Nearly 20 years ago, in a review essay on "Theory in anthropology since the sixties," Ortner observed that "For the past several years, there has been growing interest in analysis focussed through one or another of a bundle of interrelated terms: practice, praxis, action, interaction, activity, experience, performance," and identified it as one of the most promising and interesting recent trends in her field. Referring to connected work in linguistics, sociology, history, and literary studies, Ortner (1984:44–5) observed that "the present movement appears much broader than the field of anthropology alone." Yet while the interest in practice has only continued to grow, relatively few writers explicitly identify themselves as "practice theorists," and among those who do, there is considerable disagreement as to who is a practice theorist and how practice theory is to be understood. Practice theorists have often presented their work in a rhetoric of revolution and

radical change, on which almost all past work is condemned as part of a monolithic "tradition." They have rarely acknowledged in any detail the points on which they agree with anyone other than their immediate allies. It is only recently that the work of carefully comparing and contrasting different practice approaches and examining their relationship to previous work has begun; *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (Schatzki et al. 2001), the first volume to bring together philosophers, sociologists, and scholars of science to explore the significance of practices in human life, was still in press when this chapter was written.

One reason for this state of affairs is that most practice theorists are opposed to the very idea of a *theory* of practice, if one considers a "theory" to be a formal system of hypotheses that generate explanations and predictions. However, there is also a much more open-ended sense in which the term "theory" is used for any general or systematic way of approaching a given subject matter, a usage which includes such activities as providing models, offering exemplary studies of particular cases, developing conceptual frameworks or categories, or providing a genealogy, and it is in this sense in which "practice theory" is a theory. But even so, it would be a misnomer to speak of all work on practices as "practice *theory*," as one motivation for attending closely to practice, particularly among those most influenced by Wittgenstein, is a thoroughgoing opposition to theorizing about practice. On this view, it is precisely those aspects of our practical abilities that cannot be captured by a systematic or formal account that are the point of attending to practice. For this reason, it can be helpful to talk more inclusively of a practical turn, and to regard practice theory as one part of it. One of the ironies of the relationship between these intertwined yet opposing approaches is that practice theorists such as Bourdieu or Bloor employ Wittgensteinian arguments for the irreducibility of practice to theory in the service of a systematic theory of practice.

Within the field of social theory, practice talk has attracted those who see it as a way of moving beyond traditional debates about methodology and ontology, over whether social theory should commit itself to giving a fundamental place to social wholes – overarching categories such as nation, community, class, or race – or whether it must begin with individuals, such as rational actors, human beings, utility maximizers, or biological organisms. Thus Schatzki takes "practice theory" to cover

> a collection of accounts that promote practices as the fundamental social phenomenon. Such theorists as Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Jean-François Lyotard, Charles Taylor, and to some extent Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, agree that practices are not only pivotal objects of analysis in an account of contemporary Western society, but also the central phenomenon by reference to which other social entities such as actions, institutions, and structures are to be understood. (Schatzki 1996:11)

Practice theory also offers a new approach to seemingly irresoluble problems about rule-following. Preda has proposed that practice theory is a response to

problems that social theorists have faced in making sense of the assumption that "rules of conduct" must play a foundational role in any account of human activity. How are such rules to be reconstructed from concrete examples of their application? What does it mean to say that someone is following a rule? How is social order achieved and reproduced? In view of the difficulties that these questions have raised for theorists who have treated rule-following as foundational, practice theorists have claimed that "rethinking social rules leads to a reconceptualization of social order and, therefore, of the sociological enterprise" (Preda 2000:270) Preda focuses on three constellations of practice theorists: Bourdieu and his collaborators; Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, and the work of ethnomethodologists such as Michael Lynch, Jeff Coulter and David Bogen; and Michel Callon and Bruno Latour's actor-network theory.

While the term "practice theory" is most commonly applied to the relatively small groups of social theorists discussed by Schatzki and Preda, they are part of a much more widespread "practical turn," and it is that turn which is my principal topic. A survey of the philosophical antecedents from Aristotle to Marx and American pragmatism is not possible here. For our purposes, and for many participants in the current practical turn, practice theory has its roots in the work of Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and principally Heidegger's *Being and Time* ([1927] 1962) and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* ([1953] 1958).

Being-in-the-World and Practical Holism

Basic disagreements about theory and practice not only divide practice theorists, but lead to systematic and far-reaching misunderstandings. This problem is particularly acute in the case of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, where sympathetic exposition often takes the form of uncritical paraphrase, and unsympathetic criticism usually turns their writings into trivial falsehoods. It is for this reason that I take as my point of departure Hubert Dreyfus's lucid and provocative Wittgensteinian interpretation of Heidegger on the primacy of practice. Dreyfus draws a helpful distinction between two kinds of holism about meaning and interpretation. Theoretical holism holds that all understanding is a matter of interpreting, in the sense of applying a familiar theory, a "home language," to an unfamiliar one, the "target language." On this Quinean model, we always have to start from our understanding of our own language, an understanding that consists in a system of rules and representations. Practical holism is the view that while understanding "involves explicit beliefs and hypotheses, these can only be meaningful in specific contexts and against a background of shared practices" (Dreyfus 1980:7). The practical holist agrees with the theoretical holist that we are always already within the "hermeneutic circle" – we have no alternative to starting with our current understanding – but argues that theoretical holism

mistakenly conceives of understanding a language on the model of formulating a theory, or mapping an unfamiliar landscape. This leaves out the background practices, equipment, locations, and broader horizons that are not specific presuppositions or assumptions, yet are part and parcel of our ability to engage in conversation or find our way about.

> So long as he remains unaware of the limits inherent in his point of view on the object, the anthropologist is condemned to adopt unwittingly for his own use the representation of action which is forced on agents or groups when they lack practical mastery of a highly valued competence and have to provide themselves with an explicit and at least semi-formalized substitute for it in the form of a *repertoire of rules*. . . . It is significant that "culture" is sometimes described as a *map*; it is the analogy which occurs to an outsider who has to find his way around in a foreign landscape and who compensates for his lack of practical mastery, the prerogative of the native, by the use of a model of all possible routes. (Bourdieu 1977:2)

Considered in abstraction from its context, a rule, like an ostensive definition, can be made to conform with every course of action. At first sight, stating a familiar rule, or pointing to an object in plain view, are acts that seem entirely straightforward and unproblematic. But with a little ingenuity, we can easily imagine circumstances in which the rule, or the act of pointing, do not have their usual significance. For instance, a word used in stating the rule may have been given an unusual meaning, or the object pointed to is found by following a line from finger to elbow. Furthermore, we can just as easily imagine that these clarificatory statements are themselves open to reinterpretation. In such a case, "we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another lying behind it" (Wittgenstein [1953] 1958:§201.) It is only when we return to the "rough ground" (§107) and consider the background of practices to which a rule belongs that the rule takes on a determinate form. The theoretical holist will reply that if such a background is necessary, it must be analyzable in terms of further rules, intentions, or a tacit belief system. In turn, the practical holist will respond that it is a mistake to postulate tacit belief whenever explicit beliefs cannot be found, and to fail to do justice to the contextual, embodied, and improvisational character of practice. Rules are not self-interpreting, and their application depends on skill: "rules leave loop-holes open, and the practice has to speak for itself" (Wittgenstein 1969:§139).

In *Being-in-the-World*, Dreyfus argues that for both Wittgenstein and Heidegger, conformity to publicly established norms is woven into the fabric of our lives, that "the source of the intelligibility of the world is the average public practices through which alone there can be any understanding at all" (Dreyfus 1991:155). The norms that are constitutive of these practices should not be understood in terms of sharing explicitly stated or statable beliefs or values, or in terms of conscious intentions – although these will certainly play a part from time to

time – but rather as a matter of unreflectively acting in the same way as others, of doing what "one" does. Good examples are the way in which one typically conforms to local patterns of pronunciation and comportment:

> If I pronounce a word or name incorrectly others will pronounce the word correctly with a subtle stress on what I have mispronounced, and often I shape up without even noticing. (We certainly do not notice how we are shaped into standing the distance from others one is supposed to stand.) (Dreyfus 1991:152)

The "averageness" of these practices is not primarily statistical or causal: it is the result of the way conformity shapes what we do and what we are. Dreyfus reads Heidegger and Wittgenstein as replacing a view on which communication is made possible by our knowledge of objects by a view on which knowledge of objects is made possible by a shared language and background practices: "We have the *same thing* in view, because it is in *the same* averageness that we have a common understanding of what is said" (Heidegger [1927] 1962:168). Another way of putting this point is to say that "our social practices embody an ontology" (Dreyfus 1991:16).

In defending Heidegger's thesis that conformity is the source of intelligibility, Dreyfus cites a much-quoted passage from Wittgenstein's *Investigations* ([1953] 1958:§241) and provides a parenthetical translation:

> Wittgenstein answers an objector's question just as Heidegger would:
> "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" – It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions [intentional states] but in form of life [background practices]. (Dreyfus 1991:155)

We can sum up this practical holist reading as follows: unless we shared a language, where a language is understood to include background practices, we could not say anything, true or false. Dreyfus has recently restated these claims in closely related terms:

> In my Commentary, I spelled out Heidegger's basic theses that (1) people have skills for coping with equipment, other people, and themselves; (2) their shared everyday coping practices conform to norms; (3) the interrelated totality of equipment, norms and social roles form a whole which Heidegger calls "significance"; (4) significance is the basis of average intelligibility; (5) this average intelligibility can be further articulated in language. . . . I concluded that, for both Heidegger and Wittgenstein, the source of the intelligibility of the world and of Dasein is the average public practices articulated in ordinary language. (Dreyfus 2000b:156)

Practice enters this account in two different but related ways. First, there are the familiar, if ordinarily unnoticed, "coping skills," that are taken for granted in our everyday activity, which Dreyfus refers to in (1). Favored examples include

the skills involved in pronouncing words and distance-standing, but such skills are omnipresent in our dealings with our surroundings, others, and even ourselves. One of the main contentions of Division I of *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1962) is that these practices cannot be understood piecemeal. Instead they hang together to form a whole, the phenomenon of "being-in-the-world," which is prior to both self and world as those terms are ordinarily understood. This leads us from average public practices, the particular skills that are the topic of thesis (1), to "significance," the interrelated totality that is the topic of thesis (3). But this brings us to the second level at which practice enters the account: background coping. Significance, understood as background coping, is not something radically different from ordinary coping, "rather, it is *the same sort of coping* functioning as the holistic background for all purposive comportment. . . . Being-in-the-world is just more skilled activity" (Dreyfus 1991:107). More recently, Dreyfus has been led to qualify this identification, acknowledging that background practices are more than the sum of our coping skills, connecting them with Heidegger's conception of "disclosure," as what makes coping skills possible (see Wrathall 2000, Dreyfus 2000a:338–9.) As Rouse (2000) has observed, overemphasizing the contrasts between "coping skills" and explicit rule-following or action can lead us to overlook how much they have in common. Interpreting background practices as disclosure should not lead to an approach on which practical activity is contrasted with the nonpractical, but rather one on which every aspect of our lives is always already within a practical horizon: "practices are not just agents' activities but also the configuration of the world within which these activities are significant" (Rouse 1996:133). Just what this horizon amounts to is the principal topic of Division I of *Being and Time*. Without delving further into Heideggerese and Heidegger exegesis, one can say that it includes an orientation toward others, familiar things, locations, mood, past circumstances and future projects.

Critics of practical holism usually take talk of practices to be another way of talking about a more familiar category, such as the causes of behavior, observable regularities in behavior, or systems of belief. But practices are neither simply intentional states nor behavior, and theories of practice that attempt to account for practices in those terms alone fail to do them justice. Readers of Heidegger and Wittgenstein who are looking for a positive theory often take their talk of practices or "forms of life" as a starting point for a theory of practice. The point of the positive views would be to justify our talk of meaning and understanding, by locating it either within the space of causes or the space of reasons – what Bourdieu calls the "dilemma of mechanism or finalism" (Bourdieu 1977:22). "Mechanists" offer a nonintentional, or nonnormative, theory of practice, by placing it in a broader context of human behavior which can be described in naturalistic and causal terms (see, e.g., Bloor 1983, 1997, 2001)."Finalists" give an intentional, or normative theory of practice, by placing it in a broader context of human behavior which can best be described in terms of justification or reason giving (see, e.g., Brandom 1994).

However, both the normative and causal approaches only get at part of what practices are, and neither delivers on the promise of finding a way out of the standard and misleading philosophical dichotomies. They are two sides of the same coin. Bourdieu, like the Heidegger of *Being-in-the-World*, believes that practical holism offers the correct way out of this dilemma – a theory of practice that neither reduces practices to a system of rules nor to a causal theory:

> The place which a notion as visibly ambiguous as that of the *rule* occupies in anthropological or linguistic theory cannot be fully understood unless it is seen that this notion provides a solution to the contradictions and difficulties to which the researcher is condemned by an inadequate or – which amounts to the same thing – an implicit theory of practice. (Bourdieu 1977:22)

Bourdieu believes that the notion of "the *rule*" provides the solution to the problems posed by finalist and mechanist theories of practice, because it provides the basis for an explicit theory of what he calls the "habitus." Roughly speaking, habitus is Bourdieu's expression for what other practice theorists speak of as "know-how" or "practical understanding": those skills that make explicit rule-following possible, and which are the principal concern of his theory of practice. This theory aims to overcome the dilemma of mechanism or finalism within a broader framework that makes clear why each of these competitors offers a misleading and partial description of a more complex phenomenon.

Two Philosophers and an Antiphilosophy: Kripkenstein, Winchgenstein, and Therapeutic Quietism

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, a book that maintains that "we may not advance any kind of theory. . . . We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place" (Wittgenstein [1953] 1958:§109) is at first sight an odd place to look for a practice *theory*, even on the loosest understanding of "theory." But there is actually a close connection between Wittgenstein's deep-rooted mistrust of philosophical theorizing and the theories his readers have found in the *Philosophical Investigations*. While the idea that Wittgenstein's skeptical questions about how rule-following is possible led him to a theory of practice can already be found in Winch (1958) and Fogelin ([1976] 1987), Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982) set the terms of the current debate. Kripke reads Wittgenstein as raising and responding to a skeptical argument about rule-following, that is, as replying to someone who holds that we cannot provide a satisfactory answer to the question about what it is to follow a rule. The book sets out an argument that supposedly shows there is never any fact of the matter about whether one has followed a rule correctly, because one can always come up with a reading of the rule on which another action is the

right one. Because Kripke explicitly avoids committing himself to the view that the argument is Wittgenstein's, or endorsing it himself, it is convenient to put questions of authorship to one side by speaking of the skeptical view as "Kripkenstein's."

While Kripkensteinian skepticism about rule-following has few supporters, it has become the point of departure and disagreement for the standard approaches to rule-following. Most readers agree with Kripke that Wittgenstein is replying to skepticism about rule-following, but dispute the right answer. The two main camps are known as "individualists" and "communitarians." "Individualists," such as McGinn (1984) and Blackburn (1984) maintain that a single individual can provide the resources for a solution. In other words, the practices involved in following a rule may be the practices of an isolated individual. "Communitarians" such as Winch (1958) or Bloor (1983, 1997), hold that answering the skeptical problem is only possible if one is a member of a community – a group of a certain kind – and so the practices in question must be social, if not community-wide.

A further alternative is to hold that the debates between skeptics and antiskeptics, individualists and communitarians, miss Wittgenstein's point, which is that there is no philosophical problem about rule-following, no "gap" between rules and their application of the kind that concerns both skeptics and antiskeptics. Kripkensteinian theories of rule-following are based on the mistaken expectation that we need a theory of language and practice to justify our talk about rules, meaning, and understanding. On this quietist reading, Wittgenstein's practical turn is not the beginning of a positive theory of practice, or a pragmatist theory of meaning, but rather is meant as therapy, to help his readers get over their addiction to theorizing about mind and world, language and reality. Diamond (1991) and McDowell (1981, 1993) are prominent advocates; see also Crary and Read (2000).

The relatively small number of passages from the *Investigations* that are ritually cited as a statement of quietism are greatly outnumbered by those passages in which skeptical and antiskeptical theories are debated and defended. Nothing is easier than to read Wittgenstein as either a skeptic or an antiskeptic, theoretic holist, practical holist, or therapeutic quietist, depending on which of those passages one plays up and which one plays down. Not enough attention has been given to the fact that the places where Wittgenstein comes closest to endorsing practical holism, such as *Investigations* §241 or §§198–202 are responses to aggressive questions, not dogmatic theses. The text of the *Investigations* is best read as a dialogue that includes the voices of both practical holism and therapeutic quietism, rather than as unequivocally endorsing either (see Stern 1995:ch. 1). This is why the book provides some support for both a communitarian practice theory of some kind – where that term is understood broadly enough to include the theories constructed by Winch and Bourdieu, Bloor and Dreyfus – and for a quietist turn away from practice theory. Nevertheless, many practice theorists do rely on ideas they find in the *Investigations*, and the disputes about how to understand practice theory, including disagreements about method and theorizing,

have much in common with broader disputes about how to read the *Investigations* as a whole (see Stern forthcoming). For this reason, it will be helpful to approach the variety of conceptions of practice by looking at the fate of Winch's interpretation.

Winch's exposition of Wittgenstein's ideas about language and practice is particularly important because this is how Wittgenstein entered the "rationality debates" of the 1960s and 1970s: as a relativistic challenge to universal standards of rationality in philosophy and social science (see Wilson 1970, Dallmayr and McCarthy 1977, Hollis and Lukes 1982, and Hiley et al. 1991). What will concern us here is not what Winch or Wittgenstein intended, but the reading of Wittgenstein that most of Winch's readers took away from their reading of *The Idea of a Social Science* and "Understanding a primitive society" (Winch 1958, 1964). As this reading turns some of Wittgenstein's and Winch's most interesting ideas into a very bad theory, more Frankenstein than Wittgenstein, it is tempting simply to ignore it. Nevertheless, it is worth discussing, not only because so many philosophers still take this undead theory for granted, but because it is a good example not only of how not to do practice theory, but how practice theory has been systematically misunderstood. In order to put to one side questions about whether this is a fair reading of Winch, or Wittgenstein, I will speak of the holder of this view, whoever it may be, as "Winchgenstein."

Winchgensteinian Practice Theory

Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* defends an interpretive approach to social science that starts with what its subjects take for granted:

> I do not wish to maintain that we must stop at the unreflective kind of understanding. . . . But I do want to say that any more reflective understanding must necessarily presuppose, if it is to count as genuine understanding at all, the participant's unreflective understanding. (Winch [1958] 1990:89)

But this unreflective understanding cannot be understood in isolation from their broader practical and cultural context, the "forms of life" of the people in question. Because of the way in which what we say and do is embedded within this broader context, language and world are inextricably intertwined.

Winch's principal argument for these far-reaching conclusions is contained in his exposition of Wittgenstein on rule-following ([1958] 1990:24–39). Winch begins by pointing out that words do not have meaning in isolation from other words. We may explain what a word means by giving a definition, but then one still has to explain what is involved in following a definition, in using the word in the same way as that laid down in the definition. For in different contexts, "the

same" may be understood in different ways: "It is only in terms of a given *rule* that we can attach a specific sense to the words 'the same'" ([1958] 1990:27). But of course the same question can be raised about a rule, too: how are we to know what is to count as following the rule in the same way? Given sufficient ingenuity, it is always possible to think up new and unexpected ways of applying a rule. However, in practice we all do, for the most part, conform: "given a certain sort of training everybody does, as a matter of course, continue to use these words in the same way as would everybody else. It is this that makes it possible for us to attach a sense to the expression 'the same' in a given context" (Winch [1958] 1990:31).

An essential part of the concept of following a rule, Winch contends, is the notion of making a mistake, for if someone is really following a rule, rather than simply acting on whim, for instance, we must be able to distinguish between getting it right and getting it wrong. Making a mistake is to go against something that "is *established* as correct; as such, it must be *recognizable* as such a contravention. . . . Establishing a standard is not an activity which it makes sense to ascribe to any individual in complete isolation from other individuals" ([1958] 1990:32). Rule-following presupposes standards, and standards presuppose a community of rule-followers.

The Winchgensteinian approach gives center stage to everyday action, understood on the model of following rules. It takes for granted that those rules are usually implicit but can, if the need arises, be stated explicitly, either by the rule-users themselves, or by a sympathetic investigator such as a philosopher or an anthropologist. However, it is crucial to this approach that those rules only make the sense they do within a given form of life which, in turn, consists of certain shared practices. Social science then is the study of these shared practices. But how are the practices in question to be understood? One possibility is that they are patterns of activity, patterns that include action, equipment, sites of activity, patterns that are never precisely and finally demarcated. This, I believe, is what Wittgenstein proposed when he introduced the term "language-game" in the opening sections of the *Investigations*. In part, the term is introduced by describing some simple practices: Wittgenstein's "builders," the imaginary people who follow a limited repertoire of simple orders, children's games with words, such as ring-a-ring-a-roses, and the ways children learn words. But the term is also applied to any practice in which language is involved in some way, any interweaving of human life and language: "I shall also call the whole: the language and the activities into which it is woven, the 'language-game'" (Wittgenstein [1953] 1958:§7).

> But how many kinds of sentences are there? Say assertion, question, and command? There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols," "words," "sentences." And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a rough picture of this from changes in mathematics.)

> Here the term "language-*game*" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or a form of life.
>
> Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:
> Giving orders, and obeying them –
> Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements –
> Constructing an object from a description (a drawing) –
> Speculating about an event –
> Forming and testing a hypothesis –
> Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams –
> Making up a story; and reading it –
> Play-acting –
> Singing catches –
> Guessing riddles –
> Making a joke; telling it –
> Solving a problem in practical arithmetic –
> Translating from one language into another –
> Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying. (Wittgenstein [1953] 1958:§23)

A second possibility is that the appropriate notion of practice is rather that of what must be in place for the language game to go on. This complementary conception of practices is as "background": as whatever must be in place for the rules to operate.

These two interpretations of Wittgenstein – practices as language-games and practices as background – are closely related to Dreyfus's distinction between coping skills and background practice. The first incorporates aspects of both the "coping skills" and "background coping" conceptions, minus the transcendental aspect of the latter. However, it is considerably broader, as it extends beyond the bodily dispositions and cognitive abilities of the people involved, to include the equipment they use and the environment within which the activities in question take place.

Winchgensteinians usually speak of a "form of life" here, but there are barely a handful of uses of this term in the *Investigations* and it has been understood in the most diverse ways: transcendentally (e.g., as a necessary condition for the possibility of communication); biologically (e.g., an evolutionary account of how practice is possible); culturally (e.g., a sociological or anthropological account of what members of a particular social group have in common). However, in the 1950s and 1960s, practices were usually understood in terms of a set of rules, rules that govern use of the language in question, tacitly accepted by participants but only codified by researchers. The activities included under this conception of rule-governed language use were extremely diverse. At one end of the spectrum, there were particular, ordinarily small-scale, patterns of action, such as cooking a meal, making a promise, playing a game, praying, or carrying out an experiment. At the other end, there were patterns of patterns of action, which might include such matters as a regional cuisine, a legal system, the Olympic tradition, religion, or Newtonian physics.

While Wittgenstein and Winch stress the ways in which "the common behaviour of mankind" (Wittgenstein [1953] 1958:§206) enable us to make sense of strangers and foreigners, most Winchgensteinians have primarily conceived of these taken-for-granted ways of behaving as specific to a given community. Even though he later came to regret it, Winch did provide a clear and controversial statement of how a relativism of standards can arise out of differences in background:

> Criteria of logic are not a direct gift of God, but arise out of, and are only intelligible in the context of, ways of living or modes of life. It follows that one cannot apply criteria of logic to modes of social life as such. For instance, science is one such mode and religion is another; and each has criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself. So within science or religion actions can be logical or illogical . . . But we cannot sensibly say that either the practice of science or that of religion is either illogical or logical; both are non-logical. (Winch [1958] 1990:100–1)

Because the practice turn provides a way of conceiving of scientific theorizing as a social product, the most heated controversy has been around the application of the practice turn to knowledge, and especially scientific knowledge. Initially, Winchgensteinian ideas received most attention in the philosophy of anthropology, thanks to "Understanding a primitive society" (Winch 1964). But they soon found a particularly fertile home in postpositivist philosophy of science and the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK), a constructionist sociology of science that studied the content of scientific knowledge by means of sociological methods. Shapin (1982) is an early and influential manifesto for SSK; Golinski (1998) provides a somewhat uncritical overview of its reception in the history of science and science studies. For critical philosophical discussion, see Fine (1996), Friedman (1998), Rouse (1996), Roth (1998), and Stern (2001).

Winch's respect for the particularity of other cultures, and the need to understand them from within, was enormously attractive to those who wished to approach scientific cultures along comparable lines, by combining Thomas Kuhn's notion of a paradigm with Winch's account of understanding another culture. The crucial move here was to conceive of the culture of a particular group of scientists – one of the senses of Kuhn's famously slippery term, "paradigm" – along lines suggested, if not required, by Winch's discussion of forms of life. David Bloor and Harry Collins understand "forms of life" to refer to specific cultural or social groups, social entities comparable to the "primitive societies" discussed by Winch, or Kuhn's scientific research cultures.

> What Wittgenstein called a "pattern of life" or a "form of life" can be thought of as a pattern of socially sustained boundaries. (Bloor 1983:140)

> To use Kuhn's ([1962] 1996) idiom, the members of different cultures share different "paradigms," or in Wittgensteinian terms, they live within different forms of life. (Collins [1985] 1991:15)

> The most important idea drawn from the philosophy of social science was that actors are to be understood as acting within a "form of life" (Winch [1958] 1990; Wittgenstein [1953] 1958). The idea was to have its counterpart, in the history of science, in the notion of "paradigm" (Kuhn [1962] 1996). (Collins [1985] 1991:171; cf. n.3)

While Bloor provided a more thorough and systematic interpretation of Wittgenstein as the principal philosophical antecedent of SSK, Collins's distinctive contribution was to provide detailed examples of how to do fieldwork on a practice-based approach. The principal methods he pioneered were sociological observation in the scientific laboratory and what became known as "controversy studies," which involved looking at every side of a disputed knowledge claim (Collins [1985] 1991, Collins and Pinch 1993, 1998). Collins and Bloor both insist that their respective approaches are scientific, but Bloor has no qualms about conceiving of philosophy and social science as modeled on the natural sciences while Collins, drawing on Winch and Berger, is in the *Verstehen* tradition.

Scientific Knowledge, an SSK textbook, states that the best way of "presenting the individual as an active agent in the context of the sociology of science" is "to characterize him or her as a participant in a form of life." It explains the term this way:

> The term is Wittgenstein's, and its use here is testimony to the relevance of Wittgenstein's work, directly or indirectly, to the work of many sociologists. Those who have taken up the work of Thomas Kuhn have thereby linked themselves to Wittgenstein; so have those who have extended ethnomethods into sociology of science. Harry Collins, who makes the most frequent explicit references to forms of life in science, has used the work of the philosopher Peter Winch as a line of access to Wittgenstein's ideas. [Bloor's] finitist account of the use of scientific knowledge in this book is another version of the same position. (Barnes et al. 1996:116)

Indeed, talk of "form of life" and "language-games" has become so widespread in SSK, as in many areas of the social sciences and humanities, that they are commonly used without any explicit reference to Wittgenstein. A good example of the wider use of "forms of life" in SSK can be found in Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer's much-discussed *Leviathan and the Air Pump,* where the term is explicitly connected with Wittgenstein, but is used to refer to social interests:

> We intend to display scientific method as crystallizing forms of social organization and as a means of regulating social interaction within the scientific community. To this end we will make liberal, but informal, use of Wittgenstein's notions of a "language-game" and a "form of life." We mean to approach scientific method as integrated into *patterns of activity*. . . . We shall suggest that solutions to the problems of knowledge are embedded within practical solutions to the problem of social order, and that differential practical solutions to the problem of social order encapsulate contrasting practical solutions to the problem of knowledge. (Shapin and Schaffer 1985:14–15)

But such "practical solutions" conceal a great deal of theoretical baggage, and critics have replied that the appeal to practice is no solution at all. In the next section, I outline some of the main criticisms that have been directed at Winchgensteinian practice theory.

From Winchgenstein to Frankenstein

For over 40 years, Ernest Gellner was one of the leading critics of Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinian "ordinary language" philosophy. His first book, *Words and Things* (1959), anticipates current objections to practice theory; *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma* (1998) distills his critique into a concise condemnation. According to Gellner, the early Wittgenstein, the author of the *Tractatus*, had based his philosophy on two ingredients: abstract universal reason and sensory experience. Gellner sees this as a skeptical prison: starting with logic and an individual's experience, there is no way of escaping that isolated predicament. Gellner explains Wittgenstein's move from the "early" to the "late" philosophy by the "Habsburg dilemma": the conviction that "*there are two, and two only, options available to human thought*" (Gellner 1998:72): individualism or communitarian views of knowledge. On the first, knowledge is a relationship between an individual and nature. The alternative view is that knowledge is essentially social. Gellner attributes this communitarian view to Wittgenstein's later philosophy:

> The second option views human thought and language as embodied in systems of social custom, each tied to the community which employs it, and each logically ultimate, self-validating, and beyond any other possible validation. The custom of a community, expressed in speech, is the only law mankind can ever know or live by. (Gellner 1998:72)

Political conservatives used practice both to underwrite the customs and tradition of their country, region, or race, and to attack political reformers. Gellner's Wittgenstein is a philosophical conservative who used practice as a way of dismissing sceptical doubts and metaphysical systems: our ordinary ways of going on are in order, just as they are. They neither need any justification, nor can they be given one. This was "a philosophy which asserts that no rational, intellectual reason can possibly be found for any human practice, but that its justification can only be found by its place in a 'form of life', in other words, a culture" (Gellner 1998:105). But it is Gellner who is trapped by the "Habsburg dilemma," and

seeing no way out of it, he can only make sense of Wittgenstein as an enemy of the Enlightenment who retreated to an ontology of cultural traditions, rephrasing conservative dogmas as linguistic philosophy:

> Wittgenstein's theory of language, central to his philosophy, is but a coded theory of society: mankind lives in cultural communities or, in his words, "forms of life," which are self-sustaining, self-legitimating, logically and normatively final. . . . The real point is that the issue concerning the validation of linguistic habits is in effect the question concerning the validity and justification of social practices and customs, and the two issues become fused. (Gellner 1998:14)

Gellner gets around the problem that there is no direct textual support for this "coded theory of society" in the *Investigations* by saying that while Wittgenstein himself was primarily interested in applying this theory to traditional philosophical problems, it was Winchgensteinians who turned it into a cultural legitimation:

> Wittgenstein preached relativistic populism *in the abstract*, in general, without favouring any particular cultural cocoon. By contrast, his followers *did*. In practice, the deployment of the technique aimed not merely at obviating alleged pseudo-problems, . . . but also at positively vindicating their own "common sense". (Gellner 1998:161)

Gellner's critique is both epistemic and political. The rejection of culturally transcendent criteria is a bad theory of knowledge, because it leads to an irrationalist relativism on which every culture is internally self-validating, and immune to external criticism. Equally, it is bad political theory, because it discards the Enlightenment project of rational debate for a hazy and treacherous notion of tradition, locking each culture into a self-contained prison. Gellner characterizes this rejection of culture-transcendent rationality as relativism. But it also has a foundationalist aspect: because practices provide the ultimate basis for a culture's standards, they take on a foundational role for the culture, albeit an "internal" one. Thus, Steve Fuller classifies Kuhn and Wittgenstein as foundationalists, "only with the ONTOLOGY of the foundations shifting from propositions to practices" (Fuller June 17, 2000, email to HOPOS-L@listserv.nd.edu; see also Fuller 1992, 1997, and the 1997 *Human Studies* articles by Lynch, Pickering, and Turner).

Turner's objections to practice talk in social theory (1994, 1997), provide the fullest statement of the problem of the ontological status of practices, and particularly on their role in the transmission of culture. Turner contends that if practices are to do the work they are assigned by practice theory, then they are something that each member of a community has, and can pass on to others. But what can this thing be, if it is to ensure the maintenance of a culture? Turner argues that ultimately it is just a loose way of talking that has misled social theorists into believing that something substantial lies behind our actions. But

this notion of a practice as a "shared possession" is incoherent, "causally ludicrous." For a shared practice must "be transmitted from person to person. But no account of the acquisition of practices that makes sense causally supports the idea that the same internal thing, the same practice, is reproduced in another person" (Turner 1994:13). Turner is surely right that if we conceive of practices as akin to tacit beliefs – hidden, inner objects, that are causally responsible for our behavior – then the very notion of a social theory of practice is ludicrous, and there are insuperable difficulties in understanding how that thing can be transmitted. Turner advises us to replace practice talk with Humean "habits," observable patterns of behavior that do not presuppose a concealed cause.

If practice theory leaves us with a choice between occult objects and observable habits, or empty self-justification and democratic debate, then there is little doubt which choice is preferable. Certainly, these are forceful objections to some formulations of practice theory, but they do not show that the practical turn must lead to a dead end. One can read Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Kuhn, and their followers with Turner as relying on a shadowy, all-powerful and hidden notion of practice that, like the Wizard of Oz, is a deceptive subterfuge. But Wittgenstein is one of the greatest critics of the myth that the phenomena of our everyday lives must be explained by something invisible that lies behind them, and much of what Heidegger and Kuhn have to say about practice can be read in this way. While Wittgenstein and Heidegger have certainly inspired theories of practice that substitute magic and just-so stories for hard work, their work is also a resource for those who wish to investigate practices without being burdened by a theory of practices as hidden forces (cf. Rorty 1993, Stern 1997, 2000).

Investigating Practices

Practice theorists are drawn toward the idea that it is possible to navigate between the opposing dangers of subjectivism and objectivism, between description of our experience of agency and a deterministic social theory. Yet every attempt at such a theory has immediately found detractors who argue that it fails to transcend the dilemmas of subjectivism and objectivism. Here, we seem to be very close to what Kant calls an "antinomy" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: a dispute in which two opposing positions appear to exhaust the range of possible views, yet each of which has telling objections to the other. Like Kant, practice theorists have attempted to resolve the dilemma by providing a broader perspective from which each opponent can be seen to be partially right, and partially wrong. Yet these attempts have always met with the criticism that they are only new versions of familiar, and unsuccesful, answers to the problems at hand. Bourdieu's theory of habitus, the key to his own reply to the antinomy of finalism and materialism, has repeatedly been charged with this very failing. The

standard objection to the notion of habitus in the secondary literature is that it "slips back into exactly the kind of objectivism Bourdieu refutes" (King 2000:418). For Boudieu holds that the perceptual structure and embodied dispositions that comprise the habitus are directly derived from the individuals' socioeconomic or structural positions. "Each agent, wittingly or unwittingly, willy nilly, is a reproducer of objective meaning. . . . his actions and words are the product of a *modus operandi* of which he is not the producer and has no conscious mastery" (Bourdieu 1977:79). However, King goes on to point out that while there is ample evidence one can cite for this reading, one can also find a second, incompatible, strand of thought within Bourdieu's writing that points toward a "non-dualistic social theory founded on intersubjective, meaningful practice" (Bourdieu 1977:79).

The central idea that motivates this second strand is a close description of virtuosos, experts at work, of cases of intimate understanding revealed in exceptionally skillful practical proficiency. The aim is to characterize a practical flexibility that outruns any mechanical application of finally stated principles. Faced with an unanticipated challenge, the virtuoso draws on his or her grasp of the entire situation to come up with a creative response that goes beyond precedent yet can, retrospectively, be recognized as a masterful response to the problem in hand. (Cf. Dreyfus 2000b for an Aristotelian reading of Heidegger along these lines.) This second strand of Bourdieu's work conceives of social life as a "mutually negotiated network of interactions and practices between individuals which is always necessarily open to strategic transformation" (King 2000:431). King insists that this does not "involve a retreat into subjectivism," but the critic of practice theory can respond that celebrating the virtuoso's "strategic transformation" of established precedents does not resolve practice theory's basic dilemma. If the transformation in question is ultimately a product of the virtuoso's socioeconomic position, then we are back with the first, objectivist, strand of thought. If it is not susceptible to objectivist explanation, then either we are back with a subjectivist celebration of individual creativity, or we are still unstably moving between objectivist and subjectivist approaches.

While Dreyfus stresses the parallels between his reading of Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein's insistence on the primacy of practice, he does not lose sight of the principal disanalogy between the early Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein. Heidegger's "existential analytic," his elaborate account of the structure of the background of everyday activity, is a systematic theory of practice, while Wittgenstein "is convinced that the practices that make up the human form of life are a hopeless tangle . . . and warns against any attempt to systematize this hurly-burly" (Dreyfus 1991:7). But Wittgenstein's description of this "hurly-burly" is only a "hopeless tangle" from the perspective of an inveterate systematizer. For those looking for an approach to practice that starts from particular cases, for a way of investigating practices without doing practice theory, Wittgenstein's unsystematic approach holds out the hope of doing justice to the indefinite and multicolored filigree of everyday life:

> We judge an action according to its background within human life, and this background is not monochrome, but we might picture it as a very complicated filigree pattern, which, to be sure, we can't copy, but which we can recognize from the general impression it makes. The background is the bustle of life. . . . How could human behaviour be described? Surely only by showing the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed together. Not what *one* man is doing *now*, but the whole hurly-burly, is the background against which we see an action, and it determines our judgment, our concepts, and our reactions. (Wittgenstein 1980:§624–5, 629)

In this passage, Wittgenstein provides a particularly clear statement of an approach to practice that insists on staying on the surface, by attending to the detail and complexity of the complicated patterns that make up our lives. However, to anyone attracted to the idea that the social scientist must go beyond simply describing the detail of our everyday lives, such an approach is akin to a naive empiricism or extreme subjectivism, a misguided attempt to give up all theorizing in favor of a first-person perspective on social life. To such a critic, Wittgensteinian description is so atheoretical that it no longer holds out the hope of a practice theory: by discarding the goals of system and rigor, it avoids the problems involved in trying to formulate a theory of practice, but no longer has the explanatory power of the original, admittedly problematic, notion of a theory of practice. On the other hand, to a Wittgensteinian, a more ambitious approach that aims to discern a systematic pattern behind the phenomena, such as Bourdieu's theory of practice, goes too far in the opposite direction, substituting a theory of fictitious forces for close observation of what actually goes on in our lives. Perhaps it is the protean character of practice theory, the way in which it holds out the promise of accommodating both the aim of a rigorous theory of society, and the desire for a close description of particulars, that has made it both so attractive and so hard to pin down. It remains an open question whether it is possible to produce a practice theory that provides a consistent resolution of this conflict.

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