What is a Social Practice?

SALLY HASLANGER

Abstract
This paper provides an account of social practices that reveals how they are constitutive of social agency, enable coordination around things of value, and are a site for social intervention. The social world, on this account, does not begin when psychologically sophisticated individuals interact to share knowledge or make plans. Instead, culture shapes agents to interpret and respond both to each other and the physical world around us. Practices shape us as we shape them. This provides resources for understanding why social practices tend to be stable, but also reveals sites and opportunities for change. (Challenge social meanings! Intervene in the material conditions!)

1. Methodological Preliminaries

The question, 'What is a social practice?' is not intended here as a traditional philosophical question that can be answered *a priori* through introspection on our linguistic judgments. Rather, it arises within critical theory. The task of critical theory is to provide resources for social movements seeking social justice. So, e.g., critical race theory offers accounts of race, racism, and racial oppression, that illuminate the issues that confront the anti-racist activist. A critical disability theory or critical feminist theory, does likewise for the disability and feminist movements. Tommie Shelby characterizes the task of the social critic:

> Social critics don't merely systematize common sense or popularize scientific findings. Social critics seek to inform, and possibly shape, public opinion with clear and careful thinking, well-established facts, and moral insight. They will of course draw on and engage both common sense and scientific thought, but they do so without taking a slavish attitude toward either.[1]

The goal of the social critic is to draw on empirical, conceptual, and normative considerations, to reveal features of our circumstances that are relevant for making progress towards social justice. So, critical race theory debunks naturalistic accounts of race and reveals race to

[1] Tommie Shelby, 'Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism', *DuBois Review* 11 (2014), 63.

doi:10.1017/S1358246118000085 ©The Royal Institute of Philosophy and the contributors 2018

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

be socially constructed. This shifts our understanding of racial categories so we can better understand the ways in which they are dependent on human practices. As a result, certain justifications of racial oppression are rendered impotent.

Why, then, should a social critic be interested in social practices? Some reasons:

- Practices are a site of socially organized agency, a nexus where individual agency is enabled and constrained by social factors.
- Practices produce, distribute, and organize, things taken to have (+/-) value: material goods, time, knowledge, status, authority/power, health/well-being, security, etc. They also distribute things of disvalue, e.g., toxic waste, menial work, vulnerability. I call these *resources*.
- Practices are, in some sense, 'up to us', so are a potential site for social change.

In short, practices are sites where autonomy is exercised, but also constrained, where goods are created and shared (or not), and so are central to issues of social justice. Understanding how practices work can reveal where to apply leverage to make a positive difference. Yet, there are a variety of contexts in which a theory of practices could be useful, and different accounts may be suitable for the purposes in question. We need many tools in the social critic's toolbox.

Let's start with some cases to situate the discussion. It is customary in the United States to eat three meals a day: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The background assumption is that we eat while sitting in a chair at table, and use a knife, fork and spoon. Of course, many people eat more or less often and, depending on the context or the dish, may eat with chopsticks, spork, or fingers, on a picnic blanket or on the sofa in front of a television. We may also develop our own personal practices, e.g., always having oatmeal and tea for breakfast. But our topic concerns social practices. Local restaurants, food processing companies, food retailers, businesses, and schools, organize themselves in ways that provide for background customs. In other cultures, the expectations are different, both with respect to the timing of meals, the cuisine, the ways of gathering and preparing to eat, the method of getting food from plate (or bowl, or banana leaf) to mouth. And this affects their other practices as well, e.g., the length of breaks for meals at work or school, the equipment needed to serve food, the broader systems of food production and distribution.

On my view, social structures consist of interconnected practices. Structures are of different sizes and can be found at different levels. For example, a high school involves not only practices of teaching

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and learning, but also wage labor, accreditation, food distribution, sporting events, fundraising, security systems and policing, etc. The particular school is part of a structure of public education in the school district, and across the country. It connects the local practices with broader ones, and educational practices with labor practices. This paper aims to make progress towards an account of practices in terms of which we can better understand how groups of people (sometimes together with non-human animals) coordinate in a milieu in ways that can come to constitute social structures.[2]

2. Towards a Theory: Some Considerations

Let's begin with a series of considerations that are relevant to constructing an account. Building on these considerations, I will offer a proposal for we might take a practice to be in §3.

2.1. Practices provide a 'stage setting' for action

In 'Two Concepts of Rules', Rawls argues that practices (such as promising) are defined by a set of rules that are *prior to* the behavior and states of mind of the participants.[3] The practices render our action meaningful. They constitute reasons for action. What does it mean to say that the practice is 'logically prior' to the behavior and states of mind of the participants? Rawls suggests that practices are necessary in order to perform certain kinds of actions:

> In the case of actions specified by practices it is logically impossible to perform them outside the stage-setting provided by those practices, for unless there is the practice, and unless the requisite proprieties are fulfilled, whatever one does, whatever movements one makes, will fail to count as a form of action which the practice specifies.[4]

[2] In some cases, the term 'coordination' is used as a success term when we have achieved a solution to a coordination problem, defined in the game-theoretic sense (e.g., where the outcome of an action depends on others, there is uncertainty about the other's course of action, and more than one equilibrium). I am not assuming in my use of the term that coordination is always a solution to such a problem.

[3] John Rawls, 'Two Concepts of Rules', *Philosophical Review* 64 (1955), 3–32.

[4] Rawls, 'Two Concepts of Rules', 25.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Standard examples of this include a move or play in a game: 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. But games are not the only, or even the best, examples.[5] Speech acts occur within practices: saying 'I'm sorry' counts as an apology, or 'Yes, I'd love to' counts as agreement and usually implies consent. And we engage in even less formal – less game-like – practices all the time, e.g., gathering at a pub on Fridays after work, singing a particular song, or eating a special food, during a holiday season.

As Rawls suggests, practices can provide reasons for action. For example, 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, however, and gives him reason to practice, to travel to certain destinations, to manage his diet and other activities. Such actions may be constitutive of his identity, who he is.

Often philosophers invoke a distinction between 'mere behavior' and 'intentional action'. Mere behavior, e.g., sneezing or tripping, is assumed to be involuntary and not indicative of our attitudes. Intentional actions, in contrast, are guided by intentions, and we typically do them for reasons. Thus, when acting intentionally we are capable of representing, at least in principle, *what we are doing* or at least *undertaking* to do. On one interpretation of practices, they are constituted by rules, and agents participate in the practices by intentionally following the rules, or at least (implicitly) taking the rules to provide reasons for their action.

There are two standard concerns about this conception of practices. First, not all practices are constituted by rules (and, some would argue, we need a prior conception of practice to explain what it is to follow a rule).[6] In any case, we should allow that practices can be loosely defined and evolving. Our practice of gathering at a pub after work may involve no definite assumptions about who is included or what we do once we meet up. Fashion is also a basis for a variety of practices by providing a set of options, organized by

[5] Rebecca Kukla and Mark Lance, 'Intersubjectivity and Receptive Experience', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 52 (2014), 22–42.

[6] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958); Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). For useful discussion see Joseph Rouse, 'Practice Theory', *Handbook of the Philosophy of Science,* Volume 15: Philosophy of Anthropology and Sociology, (eds) S. Turner and M. Risjord (Oxford: Elsevier, 2007), 499–540.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

gender, for different social settings. In some contexts, there are clear and explicit rules, e.g., a 'white tie' event; but in others the expectations are vague and it isn't clear what one is supposed to wear (though there are often limits beyond which one's choices would be inappropriate).

Second, there are multiple perspectives from which we might characterize what practices we engage in, and the first-person (intentional) perspective is only one of them. What action I perform depends not just on me, but on the social meanings of my milieu: in a foreign culture one can easily offend or show respect, unintentionally, e.g., by wearing a hat (or not), by removing one's shoes (or not). On a social 'stage,' a background practice can determine the meaning of one's action, regardless of one's intention. This suggests that what practice one is engaged in is, at least partly, a matter of interpretation. The agent's own interpretation is something to consider, but is not dispositive.

The contrast between mere behavior and intentional action depends, it seems, on the state of mind of the agent (allowing that the state of mind may be dispositional). However, another distinction worth drawing is between meaningful and meaningless behavior. The way I swing, or raise, or extend my arms, may or may not have meaning in a particular context. Socialization into a culture involves gaining knowledge of these meanings and adjusting one's behavior accordingly. Fluently socialized agents are responsive to the world and each other in ways that are not always easily accessible to the agent or governed by intentions. As a result, one can navigate a social world without even needing to represent to oneself what one is doing. Embodying social codes opens doors. As Rawls suggests, practices are necessary for (certain kinds of) agency, but even unintentional behavior can count as enacting a practice.

It would seem, then, that practices fall along a spectrum from explicitly coordinated behavior that is rule-governed, intentional, voluntary (e.g., games), to regularities in patterns in behavior that are the result of shared cultural schemas or *social meanings* that have been internalized through socialization and shape primitive psychological mechanisms governing cognition, affect, and experience (e.g., body comportment, verbal inflection).[7] It would seem desirable to include the full range of practices, from the explicit to the implicit, the game-like to informal.

[7] Victoria McGeer, 'The Regulative Dimension of Folk Psychology', in *Folk Psychology Re-Assessed*, (ed.) D. Hutto and M. Ratcliff (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007); Tadeusz Zawidzki, *Mindshaping*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Accounts of social practices tend to prioritize either 'thick' or 'thin' conceptions depending on which fits with the preferred account of social explanation.[8] On a thin account, practices are simply patterns of interaction, or regularities in our behavior, and the goal is to provide causal explanations. On a thick account: relevant patterns emerge because the participants 'understand their normative responsibility to act in a certain way'.[9] Explanation, then, proceeds by rationalizing behavior (*verstehen*). Neither version, taken alone, is plausible.[10]

If one adopts a thick conception of practices according to which the existence of a practice depends shared or complementary intentions, this leaves no gap 'between the subjective conceptions of actors and the action patterns that an analysis might uncover'.[11] However, a social critic will want to allow the theoretical possibility that agents can be confused or misled about the social practices that they enact; also, different agents can participate in the same practice with different intentions. For example, why do men open doors for women? The rationalization of this behavior 'from the inside' may look very different from a feminist analysis.[12] For this reason, neither social practices nor social relations need be transparent: I may not understand the nature of my relations with others and may actually misunderstand our relationship. An explanatory social theory may explicitly debunk social self-understandings by re-describing our social relations in terms we, the participants, would reject. Yet, we should also be wary of a view that takes social practices to be just any regularity in behavior or interaction; some regularities, such as squinting in bright sunlight, or following another's gaze, are plausibly innate. Moreover, not all social scientific explanation need be strictly causal.

I embrace the idea that explanations are answers to questions.[13] Regarding any action or pattern of action, there are multiple

[8] John Levy Martin, *Social Structures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). Also Sally Haslanger, 'Social Meaning and Philosophical Method', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 88 (2014), 16–37.

[9] Martin, *Social Structures*, 7.

[10] This debate goes back to Weber, and is discussed in virtually every text in philosophy of social science through the 1990s. For a clear and classic characterization of the issues, see Daniel Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991).

[11] Martin, *Social Structures*, 6.

[12] Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality* (Trumansburg, New York: Crossing Press, 1983), Ch. 2.

[13] Sally Haslanger, 'What Is a (Social) Structural Explanation?' *Philosophical Studies* 173 (2016), 113–130; and 'Theorizing with a Purpose: The

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

questions to ask, at different levels of analysis.[14] Action is conditioned by multiple factors (more on this in the next section). Yet, anything we might reasonably count as social agency takes place within a domain structured by shared frameworks of meaning. To identify something as an instance of a practice is to situate it within a web of social meanings that function, in the primary instance, to coordinate our behavior around resources. What we seem to be looking for is an account that allows for a broad range of meaningful action, and that allows meaning to be open to interpretation and contestation.

2.2. Coordination, Normativity, and Social Meaning

Social practices are not fully intentional, as such, but neither are they mere regularities in behavior such as blinking or squinting in bright light. Practices are in some sense *normative*. To say that practices are normative is, however, ambiguous. Systems of coordination provide us with better and worse ways of going on. It might mean simply that the relevant regularities are in fact encouraged or enforced, or it might mean that they are *properly* or *appropriately* encouraged or enforced. Not all actual social norms, or the practices they govern, are legitimate or warranted. For the time being, let's bracket the evaluation or critique of social norms and practices, and focus on what we might call the *descriptive normativity* that makes a regularity a practice.

Among other things, practices constitute systems of coordination, and coordination is not optional for us.

> Human beings are distinguished from other mammals by their extreme sociality. Because of this, solving problems of coordination with our fellows is our most pressing ecological task.[15]

Because of the huge cognitive demands of coordination across highly varying and variable circumstances, humans cannot rely on 'preinstalled, competence-specific information'.[16] Humans evolved to be

---

Many Kinds of Sex', in Catherine Kendig (ed.), *Natural Kinds and Classification in Scientific Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 129–144).

[14] Alan Garfinkel, *Forms of Explanation: Rethinking the Questions in Social Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). Mark W. Risjord, *Woodcutters and Witchcraft* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

[15] Tadeusz Zawidzki, 'The Function of Folk Psychology: Mind Reading or Mind Shaping?' *Philosophical Explorations* 11 (2008), 198.

[16] Kim Sterelny, *The Evolved Apprentice,* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), xi.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

social foragers in a broad variety of ecological contexts. This required social learning, reliable cross-generational transmission, and the material and technological resources for building on what came before.[17] In effect, humans and other social animals develop culture. Culture defines the terms of coordination for a social group and so gives its members some reason to act in accordance with those terms. Of course, culture is not *all* about coordination.[18] Humans enjoy culture for its own sake and develop it in ways that are not merely practically valuable.[19]

Culture, in the relevant sense, is not a unified and coherent system of norms and practices that maps onto a country or a region. The suggestion that Mexico or Quebec has *a culture* is only plausible if one disregards many of the diverse, conflicting, and sometimes incoherent practices in a locale, and selects a specific sub-group to focus on. Yet, culture is a basis for interpersonal connection within a community and requires some degree of systematicity in order to enable coordination. William Sewell captures the idea: 'Culture may be thought of as a network of semiotic relations cast across society'.[20] He continues:

> This implies that users of culture will form a semiotic community – in the sense that they will recognize the same set of oppositions [meanings] and therefore be capable of engaging in mutually meaningful symbolic action. To use the ubiquitous linguistic analogy, they will be capable of using the 'grammar' of the semiotic system to make understandable 'utterances'.[21]

Speaking of a semiotic 'net' with a 'grammar' remains metaphorical and less than clear. However, continuing with the linguistic analogy, we can start with the idea that there are things other than words, e.g., objects, actions, and such, that have a public

[17] Sterelny, *The Evolved Apprentice*, Ch. 2–3.

[18] Coordination may be a fundamental role of culture, but as J. M. Balkin suggests '… [cultural] tools are not always mere adjuncts of instrumental rationality. They are used in many different ways… The first is to get about the world, to understand and make use of it. The second is to interact with other people, and the third is to express and articulate human values'. (Balkin, *Cultural Software,* 25).

[19] Zawidzki, *Mindshaping*, 41.

[20] William Sewell, Jr. 'The Concept(s) of Culture', in *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn*, (ed.) Gabrielle M. Spiegel, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 49.

[21] Sewell, 'The Concept(s) of Culture', 49.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

meaning.[22] The meaning is a kind of informational content.[23] Meanings are linked in a 'net' through inferential patterns and background assumptions (the 'grammar'). Those who are members of a semiotic community can access the information and are disposed to process it in ways that reflect the relevant inferences.[24]

This notion of *culture*, is introduced as an explanatory device:

> The point of conceptualizing culture as a system of symbols and meanings is to disentangle, for the purpose of analysis, the semiotic influences on action from the other sorts of influences – demographic, geographical, biological, technological, economic, and so on – that they are necessarily mixed with in any concrete sequence of behavior.[25]

Any action results from a combination of factors. To explain why I am cooking pasta at 7pm on a Tuesday night, one might make reference to where I live, what resources I have (material and economic), the hunger that my family and I feel at this time of day, my cooking skills, etc. But another set of factors will be semiotic: I am cooking *dinner*, and *pasta* is an acceptable dinner food for those in my culture.

Sometimes the semiotic 'grammar' is explicit, e.g., the management of traffic through signals, signs, and painted lines, is incentivized and enforced by law. But much of our coordination is achieved informally. Members of a group take the culture's concepts, scripts, and meanings to be *normative* for members of the group in the following sense: when encountering others who are similarly socialized, we implicitly begin with the assumption that they will do

[22] Lawrence Lessig, 'The Regulation of Social Meaning', *University of Chicago Law Review* 62 (1995), 943–1045.

[23] Robert Stalnaker, 'What Might Nonconceptual Content Be?' *Philosophical Issues* 9 (1998), 339–352.

[24] This remains very vague and needs development. I want to avoid saying, however, that the members of the community 'follow' a rule or 'draw' the inferences. The kind of information processing in question should be available also to non-human animals. Dogs, for example, are capable of communicating and coordinating with humans by processing learned signals and signs in ways that reflect inferential patterns. One way of spelling this out is in terms of an enhanced intentional stance (Zawidzki, *Mindshaping*, 14–15, 38). See also Robert B. Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Timothy Williamson, 'Blind Reasoning', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 77 (2003): 249–293.

[25] Sewell, 'The Concept(s) of Culture', 44.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

things in a particular way, taken to be the 'right way'. We may be surprised or feel entitled to criticize them if they don't.[26] It is often ambiguous, however, whether the 'right way' is a way dictated by nature, so those who deviate are 'abnormal,' or by social norms, so that those who deviate are misguided. Once socialized, even our own behavior in accordance with norms comes 'naturally' – we develop a 'second nature' – and the role of culture is concealed. As a result, from the perspective of those engaged in a practice, it is not always clear the extent to which patterns in behavior are the result of natural impulses or social norms.

Practices, then, are certain kinds of normatively unified regularities. Following Joseph Rouse, we might say that they are those dynamic patterns of action over time in which performances are to some degree mutually responsive:

> …the bounds of a practice are identified by the ways in which its constitutive performances bear upon one another… One performance expresses a response to another, for example, by correcting it, rewarding or punishing its performer, drawing inferences from it, translating it, imitating it (perhaps under different circumstances), circumventing its effects, and so on.[27]

I adopt Rouse's notion of 'responsiveness' in order to resist the idea that the normativity in question requires full-blown judgment. Social learning is a process that at its most basic level involves a selection between actions to mimic and those to ignore or avoid, and this need not involve sophisticated belief states.[28] We should allow, however, that more sophisticated practices do involve forms of accountability that include judgments of correctness and incorrectness, right and wrong, and corresponding claims and demands.

Building on the previous section, it appears that practices (a) provide a 'stage setting' for coordinated action that gives us roles to occupy, norms and patterns to follow, and reasons to act, and (b) draw on learned, locally transmitted social meanings that enable *mutually responsive and/or accountable* performances.

[26] Zawidzki, 'The Function of Folk Psychology', 204–5.
[27] Rouse, 'Practice Theory', 530.
[28] Zawidski convincingly argues that sociocognitive competence 'falls short of high-level mindreading because it requires no attribution of concrete, unobservable mental states with content represented via individually variable modes of presentation and holistically constrained causal influence on behavior' (Zawidzki, *Mindshaping*, 15).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2.3. Fragmentation and Agency

I've suggested above there are many factors relevant to the explanation of action: physical, biological, technological, geographical, semiotic. I have also argued that we may sometimes seek descriptions and explanations of action that do not take the agent's point of view: (a) whether I insult you or not may depend on cultural norms, and not simply on my intentions or your response, and (b) my own rationalizations of my action may not be adequate to explain what I do. This, understandably, raises concerns.[29] If, within a practice, our intentions do not determine what we are doing – my intention may not be the cause, or even constitute what action I perform – then are we genuine agents? More generally, how can culture, background practices, and social structures shape our behavior without undermining our agency?

I've already suggested that culture is not a unified hegemonic 'system' that maps onto a society. It is as fragmented as the multiple practices that coordinate us in different social spaces for different purposes. To address the issue of agency, it helps to reframe culture as a set of *tools*, and practices/structures as *vectors*.

Ann Swidler suggests that '[c]ulture influences action…by shaping a repertoire or 'tool kit' of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct 'strategies of action'.[30] If I want to praise you, or comfort you, or insult you, culture provides meanings – of words, of gestures (handshakes, backslaps, hugs), of things (flowers, cards, soup) – that serve as a palate of options to choose from. In this way, culture both enables and constrains action. J.M. Balkin extends the idea of culture as a toolkit, to the idea of software:

> The idea of cultural construction is often associated with cultural determinism. But…this view is misleading, for [culture] empowers individuals even as it constructs and creates them. It untaps the potential power of the human mind just as an increasingly complicated and sophisticated software program allows a computer to do more. So we must understand cultural software as constitutive not only of identity but of autonomy as well. When we confuse cultural construction with cultural determinism, we misunderstand what culture does for human beings. Culture is not a law of obedience but the source of what we call

[29] William Sewell, Jr., 'A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency and Transformation', *The American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1992), 1–29.

[30] Ann Swidler, 'Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies', American Sociological Review 51(1986), 273

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> freedom. Cultural software, rather than being the enemy of human autonomy, is the very condition of its possibility.[31]

Moreover, the fragmentation of agency in different practices provides resources for critique. My participation in a warm and welcoming religious community on the weekend may give me a basis for criticizing the form of competitive community that is created at work; but the efficiency of the practices at work may give me a basis for criticizing the extra labor involved in the volunteer programs in the religious community. In each case, the lessons learned from one may help improve the other. It is characteristic of tools that they can be repurposed; a screwdriver can be used to open a paint can. The same is true of culture. Practices I engage in and meanings I employ in one context can transform another.[32]

> …people use their intelligence to create tools, but these tools simultaneously endow their users with new kinds of intelligence, because they allow users to experience and interact with the world in new ways. The tool changes the horizons of our imagination, opens up new perspectives, and makes new kinds of considerations possible. The tool does not simply change our ability to experience the world; it also changes the world we experience.[33]

Culture also creates pathways and networks for action. Sarah Richardson puts this in terms of vectors, i.e., 'forms of causality that are conduit-like rather than strictly cause-effect, directional rather than distinctly determinative, and relational rather than cleanly linear'.[34] In effect, social practices and structures create a topography upon which specific causal factors interact to produce probabilistic effects. Cultural scripts and narratives create valleys along which agency easily flows. Although it may be easier to flow in the valley, we have choices between valleys, or to climb the peaks instead.

This adds to the picture we are developing. Practices draw on of cultural tools to provide agents multiple paths across the social landscape, some easier to navigate than others (and some more oppressive than others). The tools are sometimes taken up intentionally, and the paths chosen, but sometimes we simply follow the path that opens

[31] J. M. Balkin, *Cultural Software: A Theory of Ideology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 19.
[32] Balkin, *Cultural Software*, Ch. 2.
[33] Ibid., 25.
[34] Sarah Richardson, *Sex Itself: The Search for Male and Female in the Human Genome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 221.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

before us, unthinkingly. Although the paths through social space are collectively constituted, the tools provided to navigate one path can be used to bushwhack new paths.

2.4. Materiality and Resources

But to what extent can we modify the social 'landscape'? In what sense is the social world 'up to us'? Consider Sewell again:

> What things in the world *are* is never fully determined by the symbolic net we throw over them – this also depends on their pre-existing physical characteristics, the spatial relations in which they occur, the relations of power with which they are invested, their economic value, and, of course, the different symbolic meanings that may have been attributed to them by other actors. The world is recalcitrant to our predications of meaning.[35]

The social landscape is malleable, but not infinitely so. Something becomes a *resource* when its (+/-) value, whether economic, aesthetic, moral, prudential, spiritual, is recognized. It becomes, thereby, a potential site of a coordination problem. Access to it is something to be managed because access is a source of power or pleasure, etc. Social meanings evolve to enable us to perceive, produce, and organize the resource.

Kukla and Lance develop the idea that there is a mutual dependence between the social and the material world.[36] Objects have normative significance in the context of our practices, and our practices are, in turn, shaped by the objects we interact with. For example, we engage with and shape foodstuffs, but we must adjust to the properties of the foodstuffs as well. Eggs are fragile, turnips are not. Moreover, the particular form of human embodiment matters. They consider the example of rain. Some things it is good for humans to do in the rain (seek cover), or with the rain (gather it in tubs), or in spite of the rain (dance), and some not (baseball). So '…the material features of rain constrain what sorts of world-involving normative practices can be developed in relation to it, and once these are developed, rain has concrete normative significance from inside these practices'.[37]

[35] Sewell, 'The Concept(s) of Culture', 51.
[36] Kukla and Lance, 'Intersubjectivity and Receptive Experience'.
[37] Ibid., 26.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The materiality of our practices also offers another source of critical resistance. If our schemas lead us to interpret some parts of the world as valuable for a particular purpose, but the world does not substantiate such valuing, then the practice becomes harder to sustain on its own terms, e.g., keeping tigers as pets. Coordination is, in part, a social engineering problem: how do we facilitate cooperation efficiently in response to the resource in question.[38] However, because practices are structured in relation to a (purported) resource and resources are things taken to have (+/-) value, there is a further epistemic question: is this resource valued aptly?

This is not a simple question. We rely on cultural schemas not only to interact with each other, but also the world; this changes the world to conform to the schemas we bring to it. In some cases, there are significant epistemic effects: the schemas we employ to interpret the world are confirmed by the world they have shaped, e.g., we allow Nestlé to drain local springs in order to bottle water, leaving a less potable public water supply, giving people reason to drink bottled water (sustaining this practice); thus reinforcing the practice of granting water rights to corporations such as Nestlé to provide bottled water.[39] Thus it becomes difficult to even see that schemas/practices are problematic, for they appear to have epistemic warrant.

I mentioned in §2.2 that there is a normative dimension of practices. I emphasized that I would focus on descriptive normativity, i.e., the ways in which practices are normatively structured, rather than providing a basis for evaluating practices. Yet we can now begin to consider bases for critique. Because practices typically function to coordinate us, we may critique them as failing to coordinate us well, e.g., by providing inefficient or incoherent means towards our collective ends. But that is not all. Practices are embodied engagements with the material world that distribute things of purported (+/-) value. Practices differ in the extent to which they promote apt responses to what is valuable: they are problematic if they presuppose something to be valuable that lacks value, if they overestimate the value of something, or if they misconstrue how something should be valued. For example, many have argued that unregulated capitalism encourages a flattening of value: the only value is exchange

[38] Kukla and Lance, 'Intersubjectivity and Receptive Experience', 36.

[39] Caroline Winter, 'Nestlé Makes Billions Bottling Water It Pays Nearly Nothing For', *Bloomberg Businessweek*, September 21st 2017. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-09-21/nestl-makes-billions-bottling-water-it-pays-nearly-nothing-for

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

value, so the value of anything is its value on the market.[40] We know this to be false, and this is why we impose restrictions on the market: one cannot sell body parts or fluids, children, or captives into slavery, because human beings and their bodies have a different sort of value than commodities. At this point it is reasonable to ask: On what basis can we judge whether a practice creates or sustains apt values? The question deserves much more discussion, but an epistemology of value does not lie within the purview of this paper.

3. Practices

Let's summarize the points developed in §2. Social practices are patterns of behavior, but need not be guided by rules or intentionally performed. They are not mere regularities in behavior, either, for they are the product of social learning and evolve through responsiveness both to each other's performances and the parts of the world we have an interest in collectively managing. This responsiveness is mediated by social meanings – information carried in a semiotic net – that enable us to communicate, coordinate, and manage the things taken to have value. I suggest that we might capture this as follows:

> *Social practices are patterns of learned behavior that enable us (in the primary instances) 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.*

Is this adequate? It seems to capture many examples. For example, the practice of an academic lecture coordinates a community in producing and distributing knowledge through the interpretation of individuals as professors engaged in knowledge production and as having a responsibility to share the knowledge, of spaces as lecture halls where students, or the public, can gather to learn, of podiums as places where professors stand, and chairs as places to sit quietly for 50 minutes to listen (etc.), all of which is governed by social meanings internalized through participation in academic life. At the beginning of our discussion (§1), I suggested that a goal of my account of

[40] Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Debra Satz, *Why Some Things Should Not Be for Sale: The Moral Limits of Markets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

social practices is to have a resource for explicating the notion of a social structure. It is not hard to see how the practice of distributing knowledge through academic lectures is connected to the construction of universities, the employment of professors, the matriculation of students, the provisions of room and board, the funding for research and study, and the rest.

Social structures are relatively stable frameworks for social agency that have material parts (an educational system includes school and university buildings, books, and such; food distribution structure includes trucks, packaging, edible stuff), but is, in an important sense, the product of coordinated behavior. In the past I have relied on William Sewell's idea that practices consist of interdependent schemas and resources 'when they mutually *imply* and *sustain* each other over time'.[41] This builds into the account of practices that (a) they involve social meanings as guides to coordinated behavior, that (b) they manage material resources, and that (c) they are self-sustaining, so presumably relatively stable. If structures are networks of practices, then, on Sewell's account, it simply follows that they have the kind and degree of stability needed.

However, it is not clear that we need our account of practices to *build in* the stability of a structure. Given what practices are, they will tend to be stable; this is a natural consequence.[42] Practices are a process of social niche construction[43] that relies on a looping effect[44] between social meanings and resources. We now have resources to develop this idea further.

→ Social meanings (in Sewell's terms, *cultural schemas*) give us tools to *interpret* the value of resources (in a context, along some

[41] Sewell, 'A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency and Transformation', 13 (my italics). The quoted part from Sewell is his definition of *structure*, that I have previously employed in an effort to analyze the practices that make up the structures. It seemed to me plausible not only that practices are self-sustaining, but that once we have this notion of practice, structures can be easily understood in terms of networks of practices.

[42] This point was raised in a discussion of this paper at Stanford University in May 2017. Unfortunately, I cannot recall who raised the question. Nevertheless, thanks to the questioner!

[43] Sterelny, *The Evolved Apprentice,* 174–177; Zawidzki, *Mindshaping*, 17–18

[44] Ian Hacking, 'The Looping Effects of Human Kinds', in Dan Sperber, David Premack, and Ann James Premack (eds), *Causal Cognition: A Multi-Disciplinary Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 351–383; Ron Mallon, *The Construction of Human Kinds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dimension) and to coordinate in their *production, maintenance, distribution, elimination, etc*.
← Resources are potential sites of value that can be shaped and transformed so that they (seem to) *warrant* and so *reinforce* the schemas we apply to them.

To engage in a practice is to act in relation to others and to the relevant resources, in ways that are (interpretable as) part of a pattern or system of coordination, and to be responsive to the relevant demands and expectations of others. We interpret and respond to a world as meaningful and then interact with it in ways that reinforce that interpretation and response among others.

6. Conclusion

Sophisticated forms of human interaction depend on more basic capacities for and forms of sociality that provide the preconditions for human thinking and acting. We share many of these capacities with non-human animals, and this enables us to coordinate with them as well. Practices are constitutive of social agency, enable coordination around things of value, and are a site for social intervention. An account of social practices such as the one I've offered, illuminates how individual behavior, culture, and other economic and physical determinants of social life are interdependent in ways that explain their stability, but also indicate sites and opportunities for change. Not only does justice require a change of laws and policies. It also requires cultural change that engages with, disrupts, and revises social meanings. And, of course, profound social change can occur by altering the material conditions, understood as resources, by technology, direct action, or even by accident.[45]

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
shaslang@mit.edu

[45] For helpful input and discussion, special thanks to Amalia Amaya, Lanier Anderson, Axel Barceló, Michael Bratman, Ruth Chang, Angeles Eraña, Maite Ezcurdia, Kit Fine, Fernando Rudy Hiller, David Hills, Rachel McKinney, Anthony O'Hear, Carlos Pareda, Faviola Rivera, Miguel Ángel Sebastían, Kenneth Taylor, Moisés Vaca, and many others, including audiences where material in this paper was presented at the Royal Institute of Philosophy, Stanford University, the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) Institute of Philosophy. Thanks also to Adam Ferner for his help and patience.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000085 Published online by Cambridge University Press