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**PRACTICAL SENSE AND SOCIAL ACTION**

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by

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## ABSTRACT

My dissertation concerns limitations endemic to those accounts of social action that do not sufficiently distinguish intelligent individual action from actions caused by or defined in terms of second-order mental intentionality. My claim is that accounts of social action can be greatly improved if they recognize that where there is intelligent action, there is not necessarily action driven by reflection, second-order states or higher-order mental content. I develop this claim with respect to three specific kinds of social theorizing: explanations, normative prescriptions and applied accounts of social action. In all cases, I argue, failures to achieve these ends – explanatory, normative and applied – may stem from failures to recognize the practical understanding or “practical sense” of social actors.

Practical understanding refers to the skillful know-how that enables individuals to act intelligently in the world. By intelligently, I mean with adept sensitivity and social skill to a background of largely opaque norms that determine how one is to “go on” in practical situations. The central claim I derive from Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu and others is that there is a more basic level of intentionality at work in human action than higher-order mental intentionality. My dissertation argues that the study of this basic level of non-mentalistic intentionality helps to solve some of the central problems plaguing explanatory, normative and applied social theories.

The dissertation has six chapters which can be grouped into three thematic sections. In the first section of the dissertation, I address explanatory models of action in the philosophy of social science, principally the individualist account developed by Jon Elster and others. I show that a model of social action based on the practical understanding of social actors, such as Bourdieu’s, solves problems which are insurmountable for individualist psychological models of action.

In the second section, I address normative social theories. Through a critique of Charles Taylor’s *Verstehen* thesis, I argue that working to make the meaning of social practices explicit sometimes may have deleterious effects upon the experiences of social actors. Because of the “positive indeterminacy” of practical understanding, normative social theories must attend to the gains and losses of theoretical activity itself. I go on to address models of normative social theory which I consider to be more successful than Taylor’s: I discuss the arguments of the “legal realists” with respect to practices of adjudication, John Dewey’s claims about the reformulation of the operative concepts of social theories and, finally, Bourdieu’s proposals for “self-reflexivity” in social science.

In the final section of the dissertation, I show that the study of newly emerging social practices benefits from an account of the practical understanding of social actors. I use the internet as a case study and consider several instances where online social practices raise challenging questions for accounts of social action. I discuss three related issues: the relationship of online information retrieval to intelligent social networks; the nature of disembodied communities; and the changing legal meaning of propriety due to online practices.

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## Introduction

This dissertation is a response to problems associated with accounts of social action. My general concern is with the limitations endemic to those accounts of social action which do not sufficiently distinguish intelligent individual action from actions caused by or defined in terms of second-order mental intentionality. Put in other words, my claim is that accounts of social action can be greatly improved if they recognize that where there is intelligent action, there is not necessarily action driven by reflection, second-order states, or higher-order mental content.

I develop this claim with respect to three kinds of accounts of social action: first, those accounts which are meant to explain social action; second, those accounts which are meant to be normative or prescriptive; and third, those accounts which attempt to both explain and guide newly emerging cultural and social practices. In all cases, I argue that failures to achieve these ends – explanatory, normative, and “applied” with respect to new social phenomena – may stem from failures to recognize the practical understanding or “practical sense” of social actors which is constitutive of ordinary intelligent action.

In what follows in this introductory chapter, I will first describe my motivation for considering each of these problems, then describe the problems as I see them, and then give a preview of solutions that I will develop in terms of the rightful place for an account of ordinary intelligent action in social theories (a shorthand I will use for “accounts of social action”). These descriptions form an introduction to the chapters of the dissertation. Chapters Two and Three focus on explanatory accounts of social action; Chapters Four and Five focus on normative accounts of social action; and Chapter Six – a case study in the application of my arguments

about intelligent action with respect to new and emerging social practices – focuses on the study of the internet and its effects on society.

Broadly speaking, much of this dissertation dwells on the relationship between social actions and practices and second-order reflections or accounts of those actions and practices; in short, it speaks to the relationship between “theory” and “practice.” At the level of practice, I am concerned with both individual action and collective social practices. At the level of theory, my motivation stems from an abiding interest in the second-order or derivative status of social theories; derivative, that is, of ordinary actions and practices which often require no theorization or reflection by social actors to “go on” intelligently. What’s more, as I will argue, ordinary intelligent actions and practices often resist theoretical articulation, and have the potential to be distorted or disabled when social theorists attempt to account for them in propositional or conceptual terms. It is for this reason that I turn to accounts of social action which are focused on practical understanding and social skill. In particular, I focus on the work of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Pierre Bourdieu, and Hubert Dreyfus. Each of these thinkers offers crucial resources which significantly aid the success of both explanatory and normative attempts to understand social action.

The heterochthony of ordinary intelligent social actions and practices and accounts of those actions and practices creates a challenge to social theory which was well expressed by Wittgenstein. As philosophers attempting to reconstruct ordinary social life in clear terms, he wrote, “we feel as if we had to repair a torn spider’s web with our fingers.” (2001, 39) My concern is with the nature of this task of reconstruction and with its ramifications for social theory and social life.



*Explanatory Accounts of Social Action*

Explanations are attempts to answer “why” questions about the ideally causal origins of social action. Chapter Two shows why the two dominant models guiding the explanation of social behavior in the Anglo-American tradition are flawed. I describe and critique non-reductionist causal explanations of social action, or what I will call “strongly sociological” explanations, and I will also critique intentional, or “psychological” explanations of social action. In addition, I consider Jon Elster’s mixed causal/intentional model of social explanation and argue that it too is problematical. In a broad sense, all of these accounts of social action are causal, because all explanations are causal explanations. They attempt to show why a given action occurred. Chapter Two focuses on two specific possibilities: mental causality (i.e. “reasons”) and strongly sociological causality (i.e. “causes”). When I refer simply to “causal explanations,” however, unless otherwise noted, I mean explanations which are “collectivist” in nature and which reject explanatory reductionism to individual intentions. I will have more to say about these explanatory concepts shortly.

My reasons for considering these traditional models are threefold. First, through them, I intend to make clear my basic metaphysical commitments regarding the nature of social properties and their causal structure; attendant to this task is the work of defining my basic vocabulary (e.g. collectivism, social realism, externalism, etc). Second, despite their problems, intentional and causal explanations of social phenomena are not simply red herrings in social theory. Not only are they constitutive of the disciplinary boundaries that organize large sectors of academic research (intentional explanations are often involved with the study of individual psychology; causal explanations are bound up with certain traditions in sociology), but they are deeply implicated in ordinary, non-theoretical attitudes about the nature of social behavior. Debates about “Nature vs. Nurture,” for example, tend to fall within the terms set by intentional and causal models of social explanation. Finally, and most importantly, to repeat: the problems

posed by these models specifically provoke the explanatory power of an account of social action based on the practical sense or practical understanding of social actors.

Non-reductionist causal models argue that collective social forces, which are irreducible to the individuals upon whom they operate, ought to occupy the central role of social explanation.<sup>1</sup> Marx's materialism and Claude Levi-Strauss' structuralism are principle examples of collectivist explanation. Causality operates on a vertical scale according to collectivists, "downward" from social properties to individuals. I argue that such models fail to give an adequate account of the special causal properties of collective social forces. The causal nature of collective social forces, in other words, is ambiguously defined by this stream of social explanation.

Intentional models argue that the two essential elements of an explanation of social behavior are an individual's intentional content – her beliefs and desires – and her processes of reasoning about how to act, given those beliefs and desires. Social action is determined, in other words, according to this general model, by processes of reasoning about one's intentional content followed by an act of choosing what to do based on the outcome of those reasoning processes. Rational action theories, as well as "methodological individualism," are principle examples of intentional explanation. These models take an individual's act of choice to be the central focus of social explanations. Borrowing arguments from the philosophy of mind, I argue that such models fail to realize that intentional content is individuated and constituted by its social context, meaning that explanations of social behavior are not reducible to the contents of individuals' minds.

Elster's prominent mixed causal/intentional model of social explanation argues that social behavior must be studied on two fronts: the rational causes of action derived from individuals' beliefs and desires and the irrational psychic drives that interfere with rational action. Elster's

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, there are exceptions to this generalization, as I will discuss in Chapter Two. Broadly, however, the sort of non-reductionist causal explanations I want to discuss are collectivist in kind. They align around a concept of causality due, very generally speaking, to "social forces" of one kind or another.

approach happily shows why an acceptable explanation of social behavior must be “fine-grained.” That is, it must demonstrate a clear path from causes to actions. Unfortunately, I argue, Elster’s account of irrational social action is opaque and at times incoherent. I suggest that as an explanatory social theorist, Elster’s hands are tied by the causal/intentional framework, and as a result his explanation of the phenomena of so-called irrational belief and desire formation is distorted. I will have more to say about Elster’s account of “sour grapes” in Chapter Three as well.

*Bourdieu and the “Practical Sense” of Social Actors*

My intention in this section is to make clear what I mean by practical understanding, and to introduce my argument that it represents a fruitful explanatory concept in the study of social life. I will also synonymously refer to the “engaged coping skills” of ordinary social actors. The idea of practical understanding, or engaged coping, is derived primarily from the existential phenomenological arguments of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, and they are put to use in explanatory social science by Bourdieu.<sup>2</sup> Chapter Three develops this claim.

Engaged coping refers to the skillful know-how that enables individuals to act intelligently in the world. By “intelligently,” I mean with adept sensitivity and social skill to a background of largely opaque norms that determine how one is to “go on” in given practical situations. From hailing a cab to having a conversation, ordinary social actions and practices require social actors to utilize this background of practical understanding in order to cope intelligently in the day-to-day world. This quick definition speaks to the meaning of “coping;” to cope with one’s environment means to act competently or with expertise in the way for which

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<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu’s intentions are, of course, not merely explanatory. I explore his critical and normative arguments in Chapter Five.

some situation calls. Animals and humans both cope with their environments, however differently. (As I will discuss in Chapter Four, the degree to which ordinary coping is changed irrevocably for animals endowed with the capacity to use language is an important question.)

The concept of social coping skills owes quite a bit of its philosophical heritage to Aristotle's depiction of the *phronimos*, or the person who is capable of doing the right thing at the right time in the right way. *Phronesis* is a form of practical understanding, and I, following Heidegger in particular, will seek to distinguish it from forms of wisdom, knowledge, or even tacit knowledge. In Chapter Four, for example, I will suggest that practical understanding is largely nonconceptual, and I will attempt to trace out the effects of this fact on normative accounts of social action. A useful distinction to keep in mind is one originally made by Dewey, between the ability to know-*how* to do something and knowing *that* something or other is the case. He writes:

We may be said to *know how* by means of our habits . . . We walk and read aloud, we get off and on street cars, we dress and undress, and do a thousand useful acts without thinking of them. We know something, namely, how to do them . . . [If] we choose to call [this] knowledge . . . then other things also called knowledge, knowledge *of* and *about* things, knowledge *that* things are thus and so, knowledge that involved reflection and conscious appreciation, remains of a different sort. (1922, 177)

In Chapter Three, where I develop and support Bourdieu's response to shortcomings in explanatory accounts of social action, I will emphasize the idea that practical understanding is not a form of tacit knowledge. It is, instead, a social skill that is presupposed by forms of knowledge. Generally, then, an account of engaged coping is one that questions the foundational role of knowledge, belief, ideas, concepts – in short, of mental phenomena – in the study of human behavior. As Brian Leiter puts it, “whether it is Aristotle, or Heidegger, or Wittgenstein, or Bourdieu, the core idea remains the same, and it is one with potentially far reaching implications: There is much in human judgment and action that is possible only because of practical skills and competence that remain beyond the reach of theoretical articulation.” (1996, 281)

I discuss Bourdieu at length in Chapter Three because he builds an explanatory account of social action on the basis of the practical understanding of social actors. Bourdieu's account of embodied practical sense is close both to Heidegger's arguments about the derivative status of higher-order mental states and Heidegger's conception of *Das Man*, which refers to the normativity of the social world. Looking ahead, I will argue that Bourdieu utilizes Heidegger's conception of *Das Man* in order to show how ordinary tastes, preferences, and perceptions are structured by the social world. He does so by utilizing an account of the body which is derived, I believe, from Merleau-Ponty. Bourdieu specifically derives from Merleau-Ponty the idea that human bodies are attuned to the normativity of the social world. Chapter Three develops these exegetical claims in the service of arguing, centrally, that Bourdieu articulates a model of social action which identifies important fine-grained causal processes of social action of the sort demanded by Elster. As such, Bourdieu's model is both coherent and rich in explanatory power. For now, I will briefly introduce the basic structure of Bourdieu's sociology, and explain in a bit more detail why I will argue that he is an important resource for philosophical accounts of social action.

Bourdieu's sociology can be summarized as an attempt to describe the "values made body" in contemporary Western cultures. His account of practical sense has two principle elements, what he calls "*habitus*" and "field." By "field," Bourdieu means practical areas of social activity – for example, "the academic field," which is itself divided into subordinate fields – each of which is structured by its own values, stakes, and standards of excellence. *Habitus* denotes dispositions, tastes, perceptions, attitudes, etc that enable individuals to be "at home" within a given social field. Bourdieu's principle interest is in the orchestration between *habitus* and fields at the level of our bodies, which he believes act as a "memory pad" for the normativity of the social world. His central intent is to show how social behavior can be intelligent and organized without being the product of either clear mental choices (as in what he calls the "subjectivist" tradition, which is quite close the tradition of intentional explanation) or

mechanical obedience to set rules (as in what he calls the “objectivist” tradition, which is quite close to the tradition of causal explanation). I will develop these parenthetical remarks in Chapter Three.

Bourdieu is interested in explaining what he calls “schemas of action and appreciation” in terms of dispositions, tastes and embodied perceptions of social normativity. His account of practical sense is meant to do this work. Its Heideggerian and Merleau-Pontian principles are evident when Bourdieu writes,

Practical sense is a quasi-bodily involvement in the world which presupposes no representation either of the body or of the world, still less of their relationship. It is an immanence in the world through which the world imposes its imminence, things to be done or said, which directly governs speech and action. It orients ‘choices’ which, though not deliberate, are no less systematic, and which, without being ordered and organized in relation to an end, are none the less charged with a kind of retrospective finality. A particularly clear example of practical sense as a proleptic adjustment to the demands of a field is what is called, in the language of sport, a ‘feel for the game.’<sup>3</sup>  
(1990, *Logic*, 66)

Bourdieu’s numerous sociological investigations examine the development of practical sense across homologous fields of cultural experience, ranging from academia to the world of art appreciation to television to gender roles. In each case, his purpose is to explain the processes whereby *habitus*, embodied in individuals, interacts reciprocally with the normativity of social fields. Bourdieu is also a politically minded thinker, and his interests stretch beyond the explanation of social behavior. He claims that processes of power and domination can be exposed by studying the relationships of *habitus* and field and he offers a quasi-prescriptive theory of what he calls “self-reflexivity” in order to counter these processes, which are often hidden in one’s own social fields. I discuss this aspect of Bourdieu’s work in more detail in Chapter Five.

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<sup>3</sup> Chapter Three will elaborate on the concept of the “field” in Bourdieu’s account. Let it suffice for now to say that by a “proleptic adjustment to the demands of the field,” Bourdieu simply means the way a player (in an athletic game or in the “games” of social life) anticipates the action for which a situation calls “understandingly.”

In Chapter Three, I describe Bourdieu's theory and defend it against criticisms principally articulated by Elster and Hubert Dreyfus. One of my goals is to articulate a defense of Bourdieu's theory of practical sense in light of the theoretical constraints and demands – both metaphysical and methodological – resulting from my analysis in Chapter One. This is, perhaps, the twin task to my argument that philosophers of social science must take note of an account of engaged coping. The foundational metaphysical and methodological questions raised by the Anglo-American tradition are too often ignored by Continental social theorists. However, these questions clarify the activities and objectives of social theory. They aid social research by contributing to a shared theoretical language and enable social theorists to demonstrate how and why their accounts of social life are plausible when they are.

My aim in Chapter Three is also to show that Bourdieu's theory of practical sense is *explanatory*. Against Dreyfus, I show that Bourdieu's account of social theory is not a metaphysical claim about the meaning of human social behavior itself; as such, Bourdieu can be said to be in the business of offering explanations, and not merely interpretations, of social phenomena. I develop this argument through an interpretation of what Bourdieu might mean by "objectivity." On the basis of this claim, against Elster, I show that Bourdieu's account of the body provides a plausible model for the "microprocesses" of social action, one that is richer and more coherent than Elster's view of the psychological mechanisms of rational and irrational action.

Having argued for an explanatory account of social action based on the practical understanding constitutive of ordinary intelligent action, I begin in Chapter Four to examine normative accounts of social action, that is, accounts which aspire to be more than explanatory.

*Normative Accounts of Social Action and the Problem of Detachment*

The second general task of this dissertation is to show how prescriptive or normative accounts of social action may fail to be effective in achieving their practical ends if they fail to recognize the practical understanding of social actors. This is a claim about the relationship of theory to practice. By prescriptive accounts of social action, I do not mean normative social theories which are ostensibly purely prescriptive, that is, theories which intentionally avoid basing their prescriptions on interpretations, explanations, or accounts of social action (e.g. John Rawls). My focus is on accounts of social action that are more than merely explanatory or interpretive, but also have admitted ideals and value the practical implementation of those ideals. I consider these theories to be normative in a general sense. Chapter Four focuses on Charles Taylor's *Verstehen* thesis and Chapter Five in-part on normative legal theory.

My motivation for considering this problem is the fear that social theories become detached from the social actions and practices of which they are meant to be an account if they fail to understand ordinary intelligent action in the right way. This possibility of detachment is deeply problematic for normative accounts of social action with pretensions to effectively implement their ideals. In what follows, I will describe my general concern by giving a brief interpretation of Alasdair MacIntyre's arguments in *After Virtue*, which articulate clearly the sense in which I mean that accounts of social action can become detached from the intelligence of ordinary actions and practices. In the next section of this chapter, I will then describe the arguments I develop in Chapters Four and Five, which follow from this motivational concern. Nearly a century ago, John Dewey worried that, "cut off from the use of experiences undergone, speculation becomes first incestuous and then trite." (1981, 249) Broadly considered, my hope is to work against this possibility.

In his call for a revival of the Aristotelian virtues, MacIntyre argues in *After Virtue* that contemporary ethical and moral theories have failed because they have been derived from the



social practices of bygone eras. MacIntyre's general concern is with moral and ethical theories that have become detached from the practices from which they are derived and which they are meant to guide. It is a concern motivated by his belief that virtues only arise within the framework of particular social practices, and subsequently become incoherent outside the framework of those practices. As an illustration of this concept, he asks the reader to think of a chess game, arguing that it can make no sense to ask, "that was the one and only move which would achieve checkmate, but was it the right move to make?" (1984, 125) MacIntyre's point is that the game (or practice) of chess is itself the source of virtue with respect to possible moves within the game. It is incoherent to ask about the right move outside of the practice.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, MacIntyre applies this concept to the development (rather, devolution, in his opinion) of ethical and moral practices. My concern about the ineffectiveness of normative accounts of social action is based on a loose appropriation of this sense of detachment of social theories from extant social practices that MacIntyre describes.

In the chapter, "Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality Had to Fail," MacIntyre argues that Kant's attempt to supplant the richness of Greek ethical communities with rules for ethical action was doomed because Kant failed to recognize the internally generating nature of virtues from localized social practices. Coherent and effective moral theories must be derived from extant ethical communities, MacIntyre believes. Just as it would make no sense to demand a formula for determining the right move outside of a game of chess, MacIntyre interprets Kant to be incoherently inquiring about universal ethical and moral formulae outside of particular social practices. MacIntyre reads Nietzsche to have definitely shown the failure of Kantian moral theory and its attempts to fill a void left by the passing of heroic cultures, the result of which is that our contemporary post-Nietzschean world has a paradoxical air, paradoxical

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<sup>4</sup> When discussing Heidegger's conception of truth, John Haugeland makes virtually this same point, asking if "3 strikes and you're out" is true outside of baseball. Much like MacIntyre's claim about the embeddedness of virtues in social practices, Haugeland's point is that the rule "3 strikes and you're out" is neither true nor untrue outside of the game of baseball. The truth of the rule is embedded in the game (or practice). (Carman, personal communication)

because we speak and act today as if we had good reasons to support our beliefs and values when in fact we do not know what those good reasons are anymore. We are living, MacIntyre believes, with “fragments of a conceptual scheme.” (1984, 2) His general historical point is that modernity exists in a state of detachment from any agreed-upon ethical framework, and is thus distinguished from heroic (i.e. Greek) cultures. MacIntyre’s prescription for this situation, given the choice as he sees it between accepting Nietzschean relativism (and its purported more recent counterpart, moral emotivism, which MacIntyre believes, like Nietzschean relativism, is a result of the failures of Kantian morality) or returning to some form of Aristotelian virtues, is, of course, the latter.

On the success of this claim I wish to remain silent. More important, for my purposes, is the helpful schema MacIntyre draws illustrating how a social theory can become detached from the world of social practices that define its relevance. Presupposed by MacIntyre’s claim is that in Greek ethical communities, intelligent ethical and moral practices required no explicit thematization of principles or formulae. Although he does not use the word, one could say that, for MacIntyre, intelligent ethical and moral action is autochthonous, that is, found in the existential “region” from which it is derived. Moral and ethical theories are bound to fail, he believes, if they try to supplant or skirt the autochthony of moral and ethical action.

My claim is at once broader and more limited than MacIntyre’s concept of detachment. It is broader in the sense that I am concerned with accounts of social action in general and not with ethical and moral theories in particular. But where MacIntyre’s claim is about the embeddedness of virtues in social practices as such and the tendency of philosophical theories to become detached from those virtues, my argument is limited to one reason for which a detachment like this may occur. Social theories may become insular and alienated from ordinary social actions if they fail to recognize the practical understanding constitutive of intelligent social actions and practices. The MacIntyrian point is that when our theories fail in this way, they have the potential to become vestiges of bygone social practices, and are inert, abstract, or incoherent as a result.

*Effective and Ineffective Prescriptive Accounts of Social Action*

In Chapter Four, I focus upon Charles Taylor's *Verstehen* thesis, which is an interpretive and normative account of social action. Although Taylor's hedgehog-like attack on what he calls the "epistemological tradition" mirrors much of my own concern with mentalistic accounts of social action, I argue that Taylor's prescriptive project suffers from his failure to fully recognize the distinction between intelligent nonconceptual action and actions guided by higher-order reflective attitudes. As a result, I argue, his *Verstehen* thesis has the potential to become detached from the intelligence of ordinary action.

My critique of Taylor in Chapter Four is founded upon an insight articulated by Dreyfus in his recent debate with John McDowell. Dreyfus rejects McDowell's claim that perception is permeated with "mindedness," and argues instead that ordinary embodied coping is largely "nonconceptual" and "positively indeterminate." By *positively* indeterminate, Dreyfus suggests that many ordinary practical skills are *ruined* by excessive attention. Athletes speak of being "in the zone," and we only have to think of trying to throw a ball while simultaneously thinking about how to throw, Dreyfus argues, in order to recognize the difference between what he and others call "engaged coping" and "minded" activities.

This argument has important, yet largely unacknowledged, consequences for normative social theory. Taylor argues that all social practices are constituted by webs of shared, intersubjective meanings. Social scientists interested in voting, therefore, for example, ought not only study quantitative measures of voting practices, as if those practices were "brute data," but rather, Taylor argues, they must study the backgrounded interpretations social agents have of their activities in order to truly understand them. When people vote, Taylor would ask, do they take themselves to be "exercising their democratic liberties," "acting like a good community member," "out to support 'Number One,'" "trying to solve the national debt," etc? Taylor believes that the task of social theory is to uncover these frequently clouded interpretations that

make our social practices what they are. By bringing the tacit meaning of our practices to light, Taylor argues, we inevitably make them better.

But if Dreyfus is right that “the enemy of expertise is thought,” then Taylor may be wrong that maximizing the interpretive clarity of social practices unequivocally makes for better practices. By showing that the range of intelligent coping practices is not coextensive with the range of human experiences available to conceptual, linguistic, and interpretive appropriation, I argue that *Verstehen* social theory is flawed. Interpretive social theory must attend to the gains *and* losses of interpretive activity itself. When it fails to do so, interpretive social theory becomes susceptible to the intellectualist fallacy of identifying thought with being, or, in Taylor’s case, the reflective and interpretive content of experience with experience itself.

In Chapter Five I move beyond Taylor’s *Verstehen* thesis and attempt to build a general argument about the effectiveness of normative accounts of social action. My discussion is aimed at the general relationship between theory and practice and in particular at the former’s effects on the latter. I begin by distinguishing normative accounts of ordinary actions and social practices from normative political theories intended to guide the practices of formal social organizations, such as legislatures and firms. I develop my claim by considering a case study: the relationship between normative legal theory and judicial decision-making. I focus on arguments made by the legal realists of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and discuss Brian Leiter’s claims about theories of adjudication in conjunction with them.

Leiter applies Heidegger’s insights about practical understanding to considerations made by judges regarding case relevance and the doctrine of precedent in order to suggest that no legal theory can ever adequately describe the activity of judges. From this point Leiter concludes that there is a problematic detachment of theories of legal adjudication from actual judicial practice. This sense of detachment is emblematic of the general problem I wish to address in the relationship between normative social theories and ordinary social actions and practices. It is a problem inasmuch as detached higher-order theories fail to affect practices in the ways they

intend. Briefly, I will also discuss Pierre Schlag's assessment of normative legal theories in this respect. Schlag argues that legal theories which are detached from the intelligence of ordinary legal practices are not only insular, but have deleterious effects on legal praxis as well. The study of the know-how of legal practitioners, Schlag believes, is relegated to the "clinic in the basement" of law schools precisely because higher-order accounts of legal action are detached from the intelligence of ordinary legal practice.

My case study of legal theory is meant to show that a social theory's recognition – or failure to recognize – the practical intelligence of ordinary social actors is a key aspect of its capacity to affect ordinary actions and practices. In my effort to broaden this argument from *Verstehen* social theory and normative legal theory to prescriptive accounts of social action generally, I briefly turn in the second section of Chapter Five to Dewey, whose insistence that "primary experience" must be the focus of philosophical reflection poses an outline of a solution to the problem of ineffective social theories.

By primary experiences, Dewey means those principally non-cognitive and largely habitual experiences undergone through the course of average social existence. Secondary experiences are second-order reflections upon primary experience. Dewey argues that a social theory can have beneficial effects upon ordinary social actions and practices only if the operative concepts of that theory are not detached from primary experience. For example, in his essay, "Towards a New Individualism," Dewey argues for a form of individualism better suited to the problems facing his day than the "romantic individualism" derived from a bygone era. I characterize Dewey's argument as one calling for "concept reformulation" in social theory. When Dewey argues against the idea of a "block universe," his point is that primary experiences can and ought to be affected by second-order accounts of social action. The reformulation of the operative concepts of our social theories is meant to promote this possibility.

However, the value of concept reformulation is limited by the extent to which social theorists can grasp their own operative concepts. In other words, social theorists must be able to

recognize their own representations of the social world in order to reform those representations. In the final section of Chapter Five, I argue that Dewey's "janitorial" attitude toward outdated concepts is valuable but limited by its insufficient suspicion of opaque values, concepts and ideals operating in the background of any second-order theory. I suggest that Bourdieu's concept of "self-reflexivity" is a necessary supplement to Dewey's faith in the beneficial powers of reflection. Rather than work directly upon our operative concepts and ideals, Bourdieu suggests that we must instead work to understand and transform the historical and social conditions of production of those concepts and ideals. Bourdieu's concern is with the "the will to transform the world by transforming the words for naming it." (1986, 840) This will represents a view of normative social theory of which he believes Dewey problematically partakes. He alternately calls such a will the "scholastic illusion" and the "nominalist fallacy." That said, Bourdieu has great faith in the power of reflection to change social actions and practices for the better. My goal in Chapter Five is to suggest how this project might be conceived.

#### *Online Social Action: A Case Study*

Practical sense and engaged coping help to explain and to assess new social practices. In the final chapter, I will use the internet as a case study and will consider several instances where online social practices raise challenging questions for accounts of social action. I will discuss three related issues, each of which has to do with the practical understanding of online social actors and the potentially intelligent social practices they create.

I will begin by discussing legal and common conceptions of property as they relate to new online social practices. I will describe a problematic disequilibrium as I and others see it between traditional conceptions of property and new forms of social practice. I will utilize claims made principally by Lawrence Lessig about the nature of copyright control in networked societies

in order to highlight the ways in which our evaluations of online practices are detached from what is new and intelligent about those practices. Lessig and Yochai Benkler alike argue that modern Western societies are in the midst of a transformation in the ways that information, knowledge and culture are produced and communicated. They argue, furthermore, that many of our second-order evaluations of these transformations – including, most centrally, our conceptualization of property law – are problematically detached from these transformations. The purpose of considering these issues is to show how my arguments about the relationship between intelligent social practices and second-order evaluations of them are germane to the practical demands of the study of the internet. Explanations and normative assessments of internet practices must be capable of accounting for new forms of intelligent social action which arise in conjunction with the particular characteristics of the internet.

Lessig's call for new concepts about property and copyright in the digital age are very similar to Dewey's claims about romantic individualism. In both cases, the solution to practical problems is presented as the reformulation of the operative concepts of our social theories. In Chapter Five, however, I will have argued that the reformulation of the operative concepts of our social theories is an important task, but one that must be supplemented by the self-reflexive study of the social fields within which our social theories are produced. In the second section of this final chapter, then, I will attempt to show how normative assessments of online practices must study the production of practical understanding in new fields of online social praxis. I will do so by discussing two competing assessments of the value of online practices for the health of community life: first, Benkler's optimistic assessment of the "wealth" of networks; second, Dreyfus' pessimistic assessment of nihilism in the online public sphere.

Many normative assessments of the internet focus on its effects on community life. Do online relationships, for example, create genuine forms of community? Alternately, do they supplement offline communities, and doing so, benefit or harm them? Are digital, and therefore disembodied, relationships meaningful? What kind of meaning do they create, support, or deny?

Is community without propinquity possible? Many who ask these questions utilize a distinction between “strong” and “weak” social ties. Strong social ties are those based in traditional forms of local, embodied interaction. They involve shared backgrounds, contexts and histories. Weak social ties, by contrast, are limited in duration and intensity and are formed around shared interests and activities.

Benkler’s positive assessment of the effects of online networks on communities focuses on the boon to weak social ties that the internet creates. Benkler argues that online relationships aid the creation of weak social ties and that the increased availability of weak social ties due to internet networking benefits the production of information, knowledge and culture in contemporary societies. Although I agree with many of the specific conclusions Benkler draws, I will argue that his explanatory and normative focus on weak social ties obscures important effects of networked social practices on the practical understanding of social actors. In other words, Benkler’s focus on weak social ties blinds him to the explanatory and normative value of the study of ordinary practical understanding.

Dreyfus’ pessimistic arguments about the harms done to meaningful social practices by disembodied online networks highlights the insufficiencies of Benkler’s focus on weak social ties. Utilizing Kierkegaardian insights about the nature of the public sphere, as well as Merleau-Ponty’s view of embodiment, Dreyfus argues that the increased presence of weak community ties harms the meaning and significance of social relationships. I will argue that Benkler’s focus on information, communication and autonomy – a focus that is representative of large sections of current internet and media studies – creates a problematic blindness in his account to what Dreyfus believes are the sources of meaning and intelligence in social life.

While Dreyfus is right to focus on the effects of online practices on the sources of what he calls social meaning, he is wrong, however, to think that the internet intrinsically undermines meaning in social life. The final section of this chapter suggests ways in which online practices may in fact be generating new forms of meaning and intelligence in social life. I will discuss



systems of online information retrieval – such as Google and Wikipedia – in order to show how intelligence develops through online networks in new ways. While Dreyfus believes that systems of online information retrieval represent “protean postmodern subjectivity” and the end of stability and order in our classifications of knowledge and information, others, such as David Weinberger, believe that new online practices of knowledge and information create new forms of autochthonous and intelligent social order. Dreyfus’ critique is of a piece with the “Babel Problem,” which, crudely put, suggests that when everyone speaks, no one listens. Dreyfus’ fear, in other words, is about chaos and miscellany on the web. I turn to Weinberger because he argues, convincingly, that the internet’s miscellany is the source of its uniqueness and of its value. Far from the nihilistic threat to meaning and intelligence Dreyfus believes it to be, Weinberger argues that the internet is capable of building an infrastructure of social meaning. His claim is provocative if not complete. I examine it in order to suggest how higher-order accounts of social action can face up to the unique intelligence of these new social practices.

## Reasons and Causes in Social Explanation

It is true, as Marx says, that history does not walk on its head, but it is also true that it does not think with its feet.

-Merleau-Ponty,  
*Phenomenology of  
Perception*, xxi

In this chapter, I identify significant problems facing explanatory accounts of social action. My critique of these accounts is more or less internal to them; that is, I do not attempt to show in each instance that explanations by way of reasons, causes, or mixed causal/intentional models fail because they fail to thematize non-mentalistic intelligent action. Instead, in this chapter, I will identify the unique problems facing specific explanatory accounts of social action as I see them, and then, in Chapter Three, show that an explanatory model of social action based on a theory of “practical sense” can succeed where these models do not.

### *Reasons and Causes*

Explanatory accounts of social action are meant to show why a given action happened. Such accounts are, therefore, in a general sense, by definition causal. But how to explain the causal antecedents of action is of long-standing debate. The question is what kind of cause

explains an action. Traditional models of explanation in the social sciences have tended toward two distinct streams of thought. The first finds the causal antecedents of action in higher-order social properties. I will call such causal models of explanation “sociological” or “strongly sociological,” and will focus principally on one kind, namely, collectivism. As shorthand, I sometimes refer to this explanatory stream as simply “casual,” as in the phrase, “explanations by way of reasons and *causes*.” I do so to distinguish strongly sociological explanations from intentional explanations, which reject the explanatory value of higher-order social causality. (I will refer to intentional explanations as explanation by way of “reasons.”) I will also discuss British emergentism in order to highlight problems with the account of causality at the heart of strongly sociological explanations. Although my general concern in this dissertation is with the distinction between intelligent action and actions caused or characterized by mental intentionality, I will spend the first part of this chapter critically evaluating strongly sociological explanations of action. I do so not only to show where these models fall short, but also to distinguish them from models of social action I endorse and which are often confused with collectivism (principally, Bourdieu’s theory of practical sense, which is the principle subject of Chapter Three). In short, I intend to salvage a concept of “the social” from strong sociological models of explanation.

Similarly, my critique of the second dominant stream of thought in social explanation – what I will call “psychological” or intentional models of explanation – is also meant to clarify my own account of social action and to reclaim a central explanatory concept, in this case, the concept of motivation. Intentional explanations of action take the intentional content of individual actors – in short, a person’s beliefs and desires – to be *causa sui* for explanation. Individuals’ reasons are understood as causes for their actions, in other words. Put more formally, the argument that we explain action by identifying the beliefs and desires that lead to it is represented by a law (L) of the following sort, according to Alexander Rosenberg: “if any agent, *x*, wants *d*, and *x* believes that *a* is a means to attain *d* under the circumstances, then *x* does *a*.” (2008, 34) This focus on individual psychology means that intentional explanation is

methodologically reductionist; so-called “macro-level” properties of social life are generally understood to be epiphenomena of individual properties. I will argue against this method, on the grounds that intentional content itself is constituted by social contexts, which means that reductionism to individual psychology (as traditionally construed) is unsatisfying as a methodological principle. In Chapter Three, I will introduce a concept of motivation which is meant to supplant this brand of psychological reductionism.

Finally, then, I will discuss Elster’s argument for a mixed causal/intentional model of explanation, a model that I take to be a more nuanced version of the methodological reductionism which structures many intentional accounts of social action. Elster’s view has the benefit of demonstrating that identifying the microprocesses of social action is a necessary feature of explanation. Unhappily, however, his commitment to methodological individualism renders his account of those microprocesses – manifested in what he calls “psychic drives” – unsatisfactory. The shortcomings of Elster’s account point to the need to move beyond explanations by way of reasons *or* causes, I argue. I suggest, in the following chapter, that such progress can be made by considering the explanatory power of a theory of practical sense, one which distinguishes intelligent from intentional action (intentional here used as shorthand for mental intentionality) in a way Elster’s mixed causal/intentional model cannot.

### *Strongly Sociological Explanation: Collectivism and Emergentism*

What I will call sociological are those forms of explanation that give analytic priority to the macro-level properties of social action. This analytic priority is taken to denote some form of causal priority, meaning that macro-level properties are said to operate “downward” causally upon the actions or intentions of individual agents. I take Hegel to be an early sociological collectivist, Marx (particularly in the Althusserian interpretation) to be perhaps a principle

instantiation, Levi-Strauss' structuralism to be a French variant, and critical theorists generally to be included in the category as well. Each of these claims is freestanding, of course; I mention them off-handedly only to provide context to the idea of strongly sociological explanation itself. Furthermore, it should be noted that I take some liberty with the term "sociological." I adamantly do not include the work of all sociologists in the class of strongly sociological explanation (as my positive assessment of Bourdieu in Chapter Three will demonstrate).

Sociological explanation has an intuitive appeal. James Coleman, for example, characterizes sociology in this seemingly self-evident way: "the central theoretical problems [of sociology are] how the purposive actions of the actors combine to bring about system-level behavior, and how those purposive actions are in turn shaped by constraints that result from the behavior of the system." (quoted in Sawyer, 2005, 216) In the next section, I will question assumptions akin to Coleman's regarding the purposive actions of individual actors. Here, however, we must consider more carefully the meaning of "shape," "constraint," and "system." My goal is not to condemn sociology itself, of course, but rather to show that explanation by way of macro-level causes is self-defeating and cannot therefore claim to represent a methodological constraint on explanations of social action. I will do so through a critique of two forms of sociological explanation: collectivism and emergentism. Both terms need defining. My claim against these strong sociological approaches to explanation begins the preparatory work of arguing that the explanation of social action must move beyond both reasons and causes and must consider motivated behavior that is intelligent but not necessarily intentional in the mentalistic sense.

Collectivism I take to be a family of approaches to social theory the common assumption of which is implicit or explicit substance dualism with respect to the nature of social properties and individuals. In Philip Pettit's terms, collectivists argue that macro-level social forces either "override" or "outflank" the intentions of individuals. (1996, 132) (For now, I intend to avoid arguing with Pettit on the meaning or centrality of individuals' intentions. His argument against

collectivism is useful in isolation from his broader project.) Collectivists are substance dualists in the sense that the social forces to which they give analytic priority when explaining social phenomena are causally and conceptually irreducible to the interacting individuals upon whom those forces are purportedly operating. The content of collective forces may be derived from a number of sources less mysterious than something like *Geist* – examples might be governments, institutions, traditions, or simply aggregates of individuals – but those sources are said to operate in principle “over and above” individuals. Hence Pettit associates collectivism with “vertical models” of causal relations, as opposed to the horizontal nature of what he calls “holism.” As such, Pettit points out, collectivism is stronger than both a reciprocity doctrine, which holds that agents are reciprocally *influenced* by the social entities they help to constitute, as well as an inevitability thesis, which holds that social properties in some way limit individuals’ options such that social constancies are observable. (1996, 139, 141 and 240)

I will argue that collectivism fails for reasons internal to its own construction on three accounts. First, it is inconsistent with the intuition that the physical world is causally complete; I will consider this problem by way of an examination of British emergentism, which may be characterized as quasi-collectivist. Second, it is unable to explain the generative nature of individual actions in relation to macro-level properties. And third, as a consequence of the first two failures, it robs human beings of even the weakest form of agency. This last argument represents a conceptual claim about agency as such. Too often, critiques of collectivism are founded on the fear that, were collectivism to be correct, individuals would not be endowed with the critical reasoning capacities seemingly required for autonomous forms of agency, as if the normative aspiration that human beings exercise critical reflection is a reason to condemn a descriptive account of agency which does not bode well for the likely existence of such critical skills. These normative concerns may be important – indeed, I believe they are – but they must be shown to follow *from* failures within the collectivist (or strongly sociological) argument itself rather than given as reasons *for* its failure.

Without argument, I shall consider metaphysical monism – in its weakest sense, which I derive from Donald Davidson – to have things more or less right about the world. The monistic claim required by my argument is simply that good explanations ought not to appeal to mysterious non-physical “special forces.” This does *not* imply that complex phenomena are only explainable in terms of their elemental physical components; in the next section I will argue for nonreductive physicalism, and, by extension, what I will call nonreductive social externalism. Monism only implies that properties of higher-level entities – consciousness, for example, according to the “type identity thesis” in the philosophy of mind – are ontologically identical to some type of property in the physical world, however incomplete our language for that world may be.<sup>5</sup> (Sawyer, 2005, 66) Such higher level properties are said to supervene upon physical properties. R. M. Hare’s canonical example elucidates the intuitive appeal of supervenience: if we say, “P is a good picture,” we cannot say that Q is identical to P in all respects except that P is a good picture and Q is not. (Horgan, 1993, 555) Though Hare’s intention was to make a point about moral properties, the intuition holds for inter-level supervenient relations in principle. (Horgan, 1993, 556)

Collectivism, if defined by the operative causal powers of forces ontologically distinct from lower-level properties, is obviously at odds with the intuitions about causality which follow from monism, type identity and supervenience. For the latter all imply what Terence Horgan calls “causal fundamentalism,” namely, that only physical entities have causal properties. (1993, 557 and 564) The failure of British emergentism elucidates this claim.

Emergentism can be characterized as both an example of collectivist explanation and as an attempt to compensate for its failures. I am referring to the British emergentism of the early

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<sup>5</sup> I take this claim to be consistent with Heidegger’s account of “fundamental ontology” in *Being and Time*. Metaphysically, it is plausible to see Heidegger as an “ontic realist” who had no interest in denying the physical structure of the world. Instead, Heidegger’s principle goal was to *distinguish* the structure of “occurrent” entities from the ontological modes of *Dasein*’s being-in-the-world that comprise the conditions of intelligibility of entities as such. (Carman, 2003, 156) For reasons that will become clear in subsequent chapters, it is important for me to square my metaphysical commitments with Heidegger’s phenomenological arguments.

20<sup>th</sup> century, largely associated with Morgan and Broad, but also, in retrospect, orthogonally, with Durkheim. Contemporary emergentism is more compelling, but is only in its infancy as a theory of social action.<sup>6</sup> The British emergentists ostensibly rejected substance dualism, but they also rejected the notion that physics is causally complete. (Horgan, 1993, 557) Emergent properties were said to be force-generating but irreducible to physical causes; examples given were the chemical bonding properties of molecules, the self-maintenance and reproductive properties of living things, and the mental properties of creatures endowed with consciousness. (Horgan, 1993, 558) Whether speaking of mental predicates or of society at large, emergentists held that higher-level properties were no mere epiphenomena of subvenient constituent parts.<sup>7</sup> The question facing these emergentists, then, as Keith Sawyer puts it, is in what way supervenient (supervenient because they rejected substance dualism) higher-level structures can exert causal influence on lower-level components. (2005, 30)

This question is overwhelmingly difficult to answer because the causal nature of non-physical properties is mysterious. Epistemic, conceptual, or analytic abstractions do not have causal power; in order for emergent properties to do the work required of them, the mysterious nature of non-physical force requires explanation. This would be an uphill battle, for it would have to overcome what Pettit calls the problem of “causal collaboration across orders.” It is hard to imagine, he argues, how intentional and structural properties are made of the same stuff and yet

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Keith Sawyer, *Social Emergence: Societies as Complex Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

<sup>7</sup> Durkheim gives what seems to be a defining statement: “The hardness of bronze lies neither in the copper, nor in the tin, nor in the lead which have been used to form it, which are all soft and malleable bodies. The hardness arises from the mixing of them. The liquidity of water, its sustaining and other properties, are not in the two gases of which it is composed, but in the complex substance which they form by coming together. Let us apply this principle to sociology. If, as is granted to us, this synthesis *sui generis*, which constitutes every society, gives rise to new phenomena, different from those which occur in consciousness in isolation, one is forced to admit that these specific facts reside in the society itself that produces them and not in its parts – namely its members. In this sense therefore they lie outside the consciousness of individuals as such, in the same way as the distinctive features of life lie outside the chemical substances that make up a living organism.” (1982, 39-40) Notice, of course, that Durkheim’s assertion about the properties of water, which mirrored Broad’s, were disproved by quantum mechanical explanations of chemical bonding, a problem pointing to the onus placed on nonreductive accounts of emergent properties to explain the non-physical processes at hand.



in some sense “do battle.” (1996, 148-150) Either higher-level properties have physical supervenience bases, in which case it makes no sense to speak of the former “overriding” the latter, or higher-level properties do not have physical supervenience bases, in which case we are speaking about non-physical entities with mysterious causal properties. Sawyer puts the problem clearly: “if the social is ontologically autonomous, then its causation is not problematic, but this leads to the problems associated with realism – ontological autonomy is difficult to reconcile with supervenience. Yet if higher level is not ontologically autonomous, then how can it have causal power?” (2005, 91-2) Horgan characterizes emergent properties as “unexplained explainers,” a term meant to show that they fail to account for the “downward” macro-level causality of social forces. (1993, 559)

Much of this argument proceeds from a very broadly conceived intuition about supervenient relations. That intuition shows that whether one is talking about the relationship between brain and mental states, artworks and moral predicates, or individuals and society, one must avoid a singular unhappy either/or: that higher-level properties are objective, in-the-world entities that exert causal force that is somehow also not physical force, or that higher-level properties are not objective, in-the-world entities but also somehow manage to exert physical force. Falling into either of these options entails the impositions of unexplained explainers; worse yet, perhaps as a result, both options fail to describe the very phenomena associated with social action. They specifically fail to describe the generativity of ordinary social action. Bourdieu articulates this point.

Bourdieu’s critique of objectivism and structuralism in the Continental sociological tradition is akin to the physicalist critique of collectivism and it shows why collectivist explanation in general misses a key element of the phenomenology of social action, namely, that individuals do not simply *reproduce* social behavior, but rather, *generate* it. Objectivism, Bourdieu argues, “sets out to establish objective regularities (structures, laws, systems of relationships, etc.) independent of individual consciousnesses and wills [in order to give a]

scientific description of pre-scientific experience.” (1990, *Logic*, 26) In doing so, objectivism “reifies” social structures (1992, 8) in much the same way that collectivism posits the existence of mysterious non-physical yet causally operative social forces. Drawing an analogy from Chomsky’s account of generative grammar, Bourdieu writes, “the problem is not the possibility of producing an infinite number of ‘grammatical’ sentences but the possibility of producing an infinite number of sentences really appropriate to an infinite number of situations.” (1990, *Logic*, 32) Although Bourdieu of course would take issue with Chomsky’s biologism, his point is that knowing a language is not a property defined by mere competence, that is, for example, the ability to reproduce a word or sentence according to a model or a rule.<sup>8</sup> Knowing a language is, rather, inherently creative, and any good theory of language must account for actual language usage above and beyond mere competence. (Shusterman, 1999, 54) By analogy, Bourdieu argues, social action is not simply a matter of executing a model or rule; one must not ignore the productive, active element of whatever orchestration exists between individuals and society. (2000, 176)

That collectivist explanation fails to explain the generative quality of individual action stems from its untenable substance dualism. Reified macro-level properties are just that, made thing-like, made into something that by definition does not require generation through individual action. Accounts of social action which focus on the primacy of rules are therefore of a piece with strongly sociological explanation. Rule-based accounts of social action too often posit the determinate existence of normative rules for behavior. In all cases, the problem stems from an implicit or explicit dualism, with either rules or collectivist forces taken to be distinct in principle

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<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu writes, “I wanted to react against the mechanistic tendencies of Saussure (who, as I showed in *Le Sens pratique*, thinks of practice as simple execution) and those of structuralism. In that respect I was quite close to Chomsky, in whom I found the same concern to give to practice an active, inventive intention (he has appeared to certain defenders of personalism as a bulwark of liberty against structuralist determinism): I wanted to stress the generative capacities of dispositions, it being understood that these are acquired, socially constituted dispositions. It is easy to see how absurd is the cataloguing which leads people to subsume under structuralism, which destroys the subject, a body of work which has been guided by the desire to reintroduce the agent’s practice, his or her capacity for invention and improvisation. I should recall that this active, creative, inventive capacity is not that of a transcendental subject of the idealist tradition, but that of an acting agent.” (1990, *IOW*, 13)

from the actions of individuals they cause. Ensuing from any model like this is an explanatory gap between individuals and the determinants of their actions. Just as the causal properties of collectivist forces are mysterious, so too is the idea of how a determinate rule could be capable of generating de facto creative action.<sup>9</sup> Drawing upon Wittgenstein, McDowell makes the point that physical features of the world, understood like “rails” which guide us, cannot underwrite our confidence in knowing how to generate appropriate actions in a given situation. (1981, 148) This is largely the same claim made by Bourdieu, who was similarly influenced by Wittgenstein’s arguments about the nature of rule-following. Bourdieu writes, “to slip from *regularity*, i.e. from what recurs with a certain statistically measurable frequency and from the formula which describes it, to a consciously laid down and consciously respected *ruling (reglement)*, or to unconscious *regulating* by a mysterious cerebral or social mechanism, are the two commonest ways of sliding from the model of reality to the reality of the model.” (1990, *Logic*, 39)

Finally, then, it appears that collectivism, if true, depicts human beings as having little, if no, agency. This follows from its inability to give a generative account of individual action. On this point (like few others), Bourdieu and individualists like Pettit and Elster are in deep agreement, although perhaps Hannah Pitkin makes the pertinent claim most eloquently: “how can a man’s character, his personality, his mind, his will, have become something external to ‘him,’ that compels ‘him’ causally? There is, one wants to say, no ‘him’ left at that point to be compelled; for a man *is* his character, personality, or will.” (1972, 272) On the collectivist, objectivist, rule-based or structural model of social action, the individual appears to be a mere vessel for the enactment of macro-level forces, however construed. On this account, as Pitkin points out, an individual is no individual at all. The very concept of an individual becomes at best trapped within something like the behaviorist’s black box – an impenetrable mystery to explanation – and at worst simply a predicate of the system itself. Even absent the obvious frightening implications for a normative theory of autonomy, both cases are plainly unsatisfying.

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<sup>9</sup> See Chapter Four for a more substantive argument against the explanatory power of rule-following.

The theoretical problems endemic to strongly sociological forms of explanation have served as motivation for philosophers of social science to avert their attention from macro-social properties and to focus instead on the individuals whose actions surely comprise the stuff of social life. To focus on individual action is to leave behind the causal mysteries of collectivism, many now argue. I will now take up arguments like these, centered as they are on the “psychological” tradition of social explanation, and show why their swing toward explanations made exclusively in terms of the intentional content of individuals are deeply unsatisfying.

### *Intentional Explanation and Methodological Individualism*

Psychological, or intentional, explanations of social action (I will use the terms interchangeably) inversely mirror what I have called sociological explanations. Such approaches to explanation take agents’ beliefs and desires – her reasons, in sum – as causes for action.<sup>10</sup> For *explanatory* purposes, reasons are taken to be *causa sui* (which is not to say that reasons themselves – intentional content – is *causa sui*; ontologically, they may very well have causal origins). Where sociological explanation is a “top-down” model of social action, explanations by way of agents’ reasons proceed from the bottom up. As such, they are focused on individuals, and are typically associated with the widely-used term “methodological individualism” (MI). It is important not to conflate psychological or intentional explanation with MI in principle, however much they tend to operate together in practice. Not all proponents of intentional explanations are methodological individualists (e.g. Pettit), though one might be hard-pressed to find a methodological individualist who rejects intentional explanation entirely.

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<sup>10</sup> It strikes me as *not* self-evident that a study of individual psychology would have to follow the belief/desire model of intentional content. Because my concern is with psychological explanation as such, I will leave this question aside. As will become clear in my critique of Elster, however, the identification of intentional content with beliefs and desires leads to a very mysterious and unsatisfying account of supposed psychological processes which are not well-described as beliefs or desires (Elster calls them “psychic drives”).

What I call psychological explanation refers to an approach to the study of social action which argues for exclusive analytic priority of agents' beliefs and desires. Such an approach amounts to methodological reductionism in the explanation of social phenomena. This is the reason for describing psychological explanation as the inverse of sociological explanation, which resists reductionism wholesale. Under this banner, I will consider a family of explanatory approaches – including rational action and decision theories, as well as common accounts of practical reason – which I take to be reductionist in the spirit of intentional explanation. I will refer to them as theories of strong MI. I do so in order to distinguish the idea of an exclusive analytic priority given to agents' reasons from what I consider to be more nuanced versions of MI (about which I will have more to say soon). This difference lies principally in what is taken to satisfy the demands of an explanation. Davidson writes, “to know a primary reason why someone acted as he did is to know an intention with which the action was done,” continuing, “the belief *alone*, true or false, explains my action.” (1994, “Actions,” 677-678, emphasis added) In this section, I intend to show that this exclusive analytic priority given to agents' reasons is problematic in light of the fact that individual actions are multiply realized in social contexts. As such, I endorse what amounts to nonreductive social externalism, which I take to mean that social behavior is only intelligible in light of social contexts. The failure of strong MI in the face of such externalism gives further support to my claim that an account of action that is intelligent but not necessarily intentional in the mentalistic sense is beneficial for explanatory social theories.

Joseph Schumpeter is given credit for coining the term MI, but its frequent use since then by thinkers as diverse as Weber and Elster requires us to give it a more precise definition. Steven Lukes points out a number of definitions of MI and shows why each is insufficient (1994, 452-453): truistic social atomism is the claim that society, institutions, etc are ultimately comprised only of people; rules, for example, are followed by individuals, and not by metaphysically mysterious common minds irreducible to individuals. But truistic social atomism is, after all, truistic. As soon as one queries the identity between social phenomena and institutions, regarding

methodological questions, for example, or questions the nomological consequences of such an identity, truistic social atomism requires non-truistic explanation. Another possible definition of MI, which is not truistic, takes MI to be a theory of linguistic meaning, such that all predicates of social phenomena are equivalent to predicates of individuals. Anything one says about an “army,” for example, is a statement about soldiers; “army” is merely a plural term. But MI understood as a theory of linguistic meaning is also unsatisfying, for we can only speak of soldiers because we can speak of armies, Lukes points out. Another non-truistic account would be an ontological one, implying the monistic position that in the social world, only individuals are real. But this, Lukes claims, is vague; it may do to dispel the substance dualism of collectivists, but its status as a positive methodological theory could mean a number of things. If it means that only individuals are observable, it’s clearly false. If it means that individuals are easy to understand and social phenomena are not, again it’s clearly false; Lukes asks us to compare the task of understanding the motives of a criminal to understanding the procedure of a courtroom.

This last argument is crucial, for it points to the fact that the definition of MI is a matter of explanatory – that is, methodological – principles. The most coherent definition of strong MI is as a constraint placed upon admissible explanations of social action. Lukes puts this plainly: MI is the claim that “all social phenomena (their structure and their change) are in principle explicable only in terms of individuals – their properties, goals and beliefs.” (1994, 453) Elster seconds Lukes’ definition: “in principle,” he writes, “explanations in the social sciences should refer only to individuals and their actions.”<sup>11</sup> (2007, 13) This notion of an explanatory constraint goes hand in hand with Davidson’s view that rationalizations serve as non-teleological causes for

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<sup>11</sup> As such, Elster argues that causal, functional and intentional explanations correspond, broadly, to the physical, biological and social sciences. (1983, 11) But as we shall soon see, Elster offers a more nuanced view of this picture when he suggests that explanations of social phenomena must be causal in two places: at the level of the formation of agents’ beliefs and desires and at the level of the interaction of agents’ actions.

action.<sup>12</sup> (1994, “Actions,” 678) The overall idea is that reasons are necessary and sufficient causes for action. Following this, “rock-bottom explanations” of social action, in J.W.N. Watkins’ phrase, are those articulated exclusively in terms of those reasons and the interrelated actions of individuals which follow from them.

Reasons have three primary aspects: an individual’s set of desires or beliefs, her cogitations regarding those desires or beliefs (her choices, in other words),<sup>13</sup> and the behavior that results. (Elster, 1994, 311) Two important features of this formula are often noted, both pointed out by Elster: first, the reasons which comprise the intention must also be the cause of the action (i.e. there must be a causal chain from the intention to the action, as opposed to a situation in which, for example, Elster’s son inadvertently makes him laugh by instructing him about how to laugh (1985, 53)); second, the core explanatory issue for strong MI is the second of the three primary aspects, namely the agent’s cogitations. “Choice remains the core concept in the social sciences,” Elster writes.<sup>14</sup> (2007, 297-298)

Strong MI is reductionist, then, because it claims that social action cannot be understood until the reasons which cause actions are themselves understood. “To understand how people act and interact, we first have to understand how their minds work,” Elster writes. (2007, 67) Reductionism is itself the “engine” of social science on this view; anti-reductionism, Elster claims, is obstructionist in principle.<sup>15</sup> (2007, 258-259) Whether individuals’ choices are taken to

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<sup>12</sup> *Nota bene*: rationalizations may not be rational, e.g. consistent with one another or warranted by the available evidence. I will have more to say on the difference between rationality and reason soon. For now, though, we can take rationalizations to mean simply internal cogitations about reasons (beliefs and desires).

<sup>13</sup> I will have more to say soon about the presumption of an identity between the concept of choice and the activity of rational cogitation.

<sup>14</sup> Obviously, given this citation in 2007, Elster maintains many of the tenets of strong MI in his recent, more nuanced position. That said, his argument for the centrality of choice is not meant as an endorsement of RAT in this text. The broader context is his argument that the subjective factor of choice has more explanatory power than the objective factors of constraints and selection. (2007, 6)

<sup>15</sup> Immediately this argument ought to seem suspect, for it assumes an analogy between the methodology of the natural and social sciences which Elster’s account of MI is out to demonstrate. Elster cannot demonstrate the value of reductionist social science, in other words, by appeal to an analogy with the natural sciences if the outcome of his argument for reductionist social science is a claim about its methodological similarity to natural science. One may also question whether reductionism has in fact had

be essentially self-interested as they are in economic models, based on utility calculations in the way described by rational action theorists, or are matters of anticipating others' intentions as in game theory, the common assumption – which constitutes explanatory reductionism – is that the basic building block of social science is the individual action guided by some intent. (Elster, 1983, 20) Explaining social phenomena is a matter of uncovering agents' reasons; no more and no less.

Philosophers of social science have sawed away at explanatory reductionism in a number of ways, the most successful of which I take to be the argument from what Jerry Fodor calls “multiple state realization” (MR). Interestingly, MR derives from Davidson's argument for “anomalous monism” (AM). Why, then, does Davidson (and Elster) argue against reductionism in the philosophy of mind but for intentional explanation in social science? First, we must understand the meaning of AM, then consider the analogy Elster and Davidson take it to imply for the explanation of social properties, and then finally consider how Fodor's argument for MR warrants a different and more successful version of this analogy.

In the study of the philosophy of mind, the type identity thesis has traditionally been taken to imply that mental properties are epiphenomena of properties of the brain. Epiphenomenalism was taken, furthermore, to imply epistemic reductionism. Davidson's AM showed this to be a false assumption. Davidson argued that although mental (higher level) properties supervene on brain (lower level) properties (i.e. are identical to them), this fact should not be taken to mean that there are psychophysical laws bridging the lower and higher levels. (1994, “Psychology,” 80-81) Epistemically, there may be no way in fact of moving from the physical properties of brains to psychological states, conscious experiences, agents' beliefs and desires, etc. Hence, *anomalous* monism. It is important to be clear on the fact, however, that Davidson's view does not reject the notion that mental states are epiphenomena of causally

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the unqualified results in the natural sciences Elster claims. Geology, physiology, and biology, for example, often appeal to kinds that seem non-reducible in principle. (Burge, 1986, “Psychology,” 19) More on arguments against reductionism in the “special sciences” soon.



complete brain states; his claim is limited to the (limited) epistemic implications of supervenience.

Davidson's view is a "token event thesis," meaning that though mental events are identical to physical events (i.e. they supervene on physical events), the relation between higher and lower level events is asymmetric. Although an entity cannot change at the higher level without also changing at the lower level, that is, it could change at the lower level without changing at the higher level. (Sawyer, 2005, 66) This point is at the center of Fodor's claim that mental events are multiply realized. His intuition is this: "it is entirely possible that the nervous system of higher organisms characteristically achieves a given psychological end by a wide variety of neurological means. If so, then the attempt to pair neurological structures with psychological functions is foredoomed." (1994, 692)

But it would be too quick to reject reductionism in principle based only on the claim that each token instance of a mental state might be implemented by different physical states, Fodor argues. If only a few realizing physical states existed, presumably they could be correlated to mental states. Fodor's account of "wild disjunction," however, puts the nail in the coffin of epistemic reductionism in the mind/brain relationship. There is no telling how large a number of unrelated lower level physical states could produce given higher level mental states, he argues. (Sawyer, 2005, 67-68) As such, natural kinds in higher level states may very well be "wildly disjunctive" from natural kinds in lower level states. Fodor may only require the conceptual possibility of wild disjunction in order to make his point about the mind/brain relationship, but as we shall see shortly, he believes that most higher and lower level properties studied by the "special sciences" are observably both multiply realized and wildly disjunctive.

For my purposes, where this model proves most interesting and valuable is in the ways different philosophers have utilized AM and MR in order to explicate the work done by social science. Elster considers AM to be correct; to say that materialism implies reductionism, he argues, is the same as to say that because everything has a cause then there is something which is

the cause of everything. (1983, 22) Elster takes the upshot of AM to be that intentional explanation may not be nomological. But the absence of laws does not inhibit intentional explanation, he believes. The consequence of Davidson's view is that actions are caused by reasons, in Elster's view. (1983, 22) Davidson himself says as much, arguing that the absence of laws does not inhibit causal explanation (i.e. causal intentional explanation). (1994, 683) AM, for proponents of reductionism in social science, *founds* their claim that intentions, qua explanations, are *causa sui*.

One can – and should, I believe – draw the opposite conclusion from AM and MR, however. Fodor extends the argument from MR against reductionism to the nature of the “special sciences” in general. Physical reductionism argues that in an ideally completed physics there are natural kind predicates which correspond to natural kind predicates in an ideally completely special science. If reductionism is true, then every natural kind in a special science is coextensive with a physical natural kind. (1994, 690) That this isn't so isn't *a priori* the case, but it seems highly empirically unlikely, Fodor claims. A reductionist view of an economic law would have to show, for example, that any event which counted as a monetary exchange has some *one* true description in the laws of physics. But what are the chances, he asks, that a physical predicate could cover not only all the actual instantiations of an economic exchange, which could include wampum, dollar bills, a check, etc, but also all the counterfactual instantiations of what *could* count as an economic exchange? The special sciences reveal what is interesting and common in something like a monetary exchange (a natural kind in economics), but what is interesting is surely not its commonality under physical description. (1994, 691) Fodor concludes:

The very *existence* of the special sciences testifies to reliable macrolevel regularities that are realized by mechanisms whose physical substance is quite typically heterogeneous. Does anybody really doubt that mountains are made of all sorts of stuff? Does anybody really think that, since they are, generalizations about mountains-as-such won't continue to serve geology in good stead? Damn near everything we know about the world suggests that unimaginably complicated to-ings and fro-ings of bits and pieces at the

extreme *microlevel* manage somehow to converge on stable *macrolevel* properties. (1997, 160)

Of course, the subject of Fodor's attack is *physical* reductionism, against which the proponents of strong MI might also align themselves. But it is implied in Fodor's point about the special sciences in general that the critique also holds of reduction to the intentions of individuals in explanations of social action. Fodor's general concern is with the very existence of mysterious (he thinks) macro-level regularities "in a world where, by common consent, macro-level regularities have to supervene on a buzzing, blooming confusion of micro-level interactions." (1997, 161) This purported mystery holds for any higher-level phenomenon that could be multiply realized (and wildly disjunctive). Because this is the case with social phenomena, strong MI won't do. In using the analogy of AM for the social sciences, the mistake, Sawyer points out, is to assume that ontological individualism (supervenience) implies methodological individualism (in the strong, exclusive sense). (2005, 77)

Properties such as "being a church" or committing an act of terrorism are multiply realized. The property "being a church" can be realized by the sum total of individuals with properties such as "believing in X," but any number of configurations of such individual properties could instantiate the existence of a church. (Sawyer, 2005, 68) There is no one way, that is, to configure a group of individuals such that they form a natural kind equivalent to "being a church." We could add properties about individuals' actions, practices, etc and draw the same conclusion regarding social phenomena in general ("being a family," "being a collective movement," or "being a conversation" (Sawyer, 2005, 68)). So too with the idea of an act of terrorism, which, because it can be multiply realized, requires some reference to the social context in which it exists in order to be distinguished from the acts of a freedom fighter. (Kincaid, 1994, 501)

"Social context," is, of course, a vague term. The next chapter seeks to give detail to its meaning. Here, what I want to establish is that the irreducibility of social context for the

explanation of social action amounts to what can be called *nonreductive social externalism*. This account is externalist in the sense that individuals' beliefs and desires are at least partly constituted by something outside of those internal mental states; it is socially externalist because that which is outside is the social world, or more precisely one's orientation in it. (Carman, 2003, 122) This is a strong claim, implying more than the idea that intentional content is influenced or manifested only in social contexts. Pettit's account of "realizer states" shows why intentional content must be considered in light of social context.

The concept of "realizer states" distinguish the idea that intentional content is influenced by or manifested in social contexts from the idea that intentional content is at least in-part constituted by social contexts. Pettit is an individualist, but not a methodological individualist. He endorses a position more or less indistinguishable from AM, arguing that "intentional profiles" supervene on physical properties, but cannot be defined by them. (1996, 28) Pettit then takes this point in the anti-reductionist direction which I am arguing is correct. Though there may be a physical base state identical to my being envious, he argues, I can't be envious unless I'm in the world, with other people to be envious of as objects of reference. (1996, 31-33) Of beliefs, he claims, the world in which subjects are embedded is the "realiser of the belief." While physical states are "context-free," mental states require fulfillment in social contexts. (1996, 44) Like Fodor for the most part, Pettit is arguing against physical reductionism. It is a consequence of his view that reduction to individual intentions is impossible. Such is the substance of his "ethocentric" account of thought. Thinking, Pettit believes, cannot occur in isolation. (1996, 106) *Eo ipso*, explanation cannot proceed by exclusively isolating the content of individual's beliefs and desires, for those beliefs and desires are made intelligible within social contexts.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I do not mean to assimilate Pettit's view to my own. I use his position to clarify the claim of nonreductive social externalism, not to suggest that he would endorse such a position. As it turns out, I will be critical of Pettit's individualism shortly, on the lights that it fails to recognize the strength of the claim that intentional content is socially realized.

One may even argue that meaning itself is constituted by social context. Tyler Burge puts forward an account of externalism in psychology, arguing that even “propositional mental-states and event kinds are *nonindividually individuated*.” (1986, “Norms,” 697) “[A] person’s thought *content* is not fixed by what goes on in him,” (1979, 104) Burge writes, arguing instead that mental states “are dependent for their individuation on the individual’s physical and social environments.” (1986, “Norms,” 697) The following thought experiment not only demonstrates Burge’s claim, but shows why it makes sense to be a nonreductionist with respect to social properties such as “being a church” or “being a conversation.”

Burge asks us to imagine a person who holds the necessarily false belief that “I have arthritis in my thigh” (false because arthritis refers only to inflammation in one’s joints). He then asks us to imagine a counterfactual world in which all factors are held constant with our world except that in that counterfactual world, the belief that “I have arthritis in my thigh” is possibly true. (In that world, “arthritis” *is* an inflammation of things like thighs.) Because the same belief cannot be necessarily false and possible true, it follows, Burge believes, that the content of the belief itself is individuated by the social world. (Carman, 2003, 148) Burge argues that all intentional content is externally determined: “theories of vision, of belief formation, of memory, learning, decision-making, categorization, and perhaps even reasoning all attribute states that are subject to practical and semantic evaluation *by reference to standards partly set by a wider environment*,” he writes. (1986, “Psychology,” 25) His goal is to show that explanations in the field of psychology ought not to be purely individualistic, a point which implies that explanatory reductionism in general is deeply flawed. By way of an analogy to geology, he writes:

A continent moves and is moved by local impacts from rocks, waves, molecules. Yet we can conceive of holding constant the continent’s peripheral impacts and chemically constituent events and objects, without holding identical the continent or certain of its macro-changes – because the continent’s spatial relations to other land masses affect the way we individuate it. Or take an example from biology. Let us accept the plausible principle that nothing causally affects breathing except as it causally affects local states of the lungs. It does not follow, and indeed is not true, that we individuate lungs and the

various sub-events of respiration in such a way as to treat those objects and events as supervenient on the chemically described objects and events that compose them. If the same chemical process (same from the surfaces of the lungs inside, and back to the surfaces) were embedded in a different sort of body and had an entirely different function (say, digestive, immunological, or regulatory), we would not be dealing with the same biological states and events. Local causation does not make more plausible local individuation, or individualistic supervenience.<sup>17</sup> (1986, "Psychology," 16)

Burge's willingness to draw analogies between externalism in psychology and other academic fields points toward a general principle of methodological nonreductionism. For my purposes, it demonstrates a deep insufficiency in strong MI, and points to the fact that we must study, in some way, the social context in which actions occur without reducing that context to a brute determinant of action. To lay out such a model of social action will be my goal in the next chapter.

But in what way? Is the task to mix causal and intentional models of explanation, in order to overcome the limitations of exclusively sociological and exclusively psychological forms of explanation? In what follows, I will describe one such attempt – Elster's – to mix causal and intentional approaches to the explanation of social action. I believe that Elster fails, but where he fails helpfully elucidates the gap that an account of practical sense fills with respect to social explanation.

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<sup>17</sup> Burge's arguments against mental supervenience do not conflict with my own support for it, despite possible appearances. Burge's point is that the content of intentional states is not reducible to individuals in isolation. His argument is consistent with nonreductive materialism; he writes, for example, "rejecting individualistic supervenience does not entail rejecting a materialistic standpoint. So materialism *per se* does nothing to support individualism." (1986, "Psychology," 15) The difference between Burge and me, then, is that he groups theories of supervenience and theories of reductionism together, whereas I identify supervenience itself with materialism (which Burge himself endorses). The semantic difference in using the term supervenience ought not overshadow what is more to the point, namely, that Burge supports the case for nonreductive social externalism.

*Nuanced MI: Elster's Mixed Causal/Intentional Model*

What I have referred to as “nuanced MI” is distinguished from stronger versions of MI because it willingly goes beyond the explanation of intentional content on two fronts: it examines the causal origins of beliefs and desires in individuals at the “sub-intentional” level and the causal consequences of individuals in interaction at the “supra-intentional” level. (1982, 463) I associate this mixed causal/intentional model of explanation principally with Elster, who argues that explanations have three principle steps: causal explanation of intentional content, intentional explanation of actions as caused by beliefs and desires, and finally, causal explanation of macro-states in terms of individual actions. (1983, 85-6) The terms “strong” and “nuanced” are not Elster’s own, but they help to make an important conceptual cut between exclusively intentional models of explanation and a mixed causal/intentional model. Elster’s critique of rational action theories (RAT) serves as a good introduction to this distinction, for through it Elster introduces his account of the causal determinants of intentional content.

Elster’s mixed causal/intentional model represents an advance over exclusively sociological and exclusively individual psychological models of explanation, particularly with regard to the importance of identifying what Elster calls the mechanisms of social action, but which I will prefer to call the micro-processes of social action, for reasons that will become clear shortly. Elster advances this helpful demand in light of what he calls “fine-grained explanations,” a demand that he articulates through a critique of functionalist or teleological social explanation. However, I will argue that Elster’s mixed model is also limited in explanatory power because of its inability to recognize forms of intentionality that are not characterized by propositional mental content. The kind of microprocesses Elster identifies through his mixed causal/intentional model amount to what he calls psychic drives. I will show these so-called drives to be conceptually vague and phenomenologically unsatisfying. This critique enables me then to turn to an

elaboration of a more satisfying model, namely one which distinguishes intelligent from mentalistic intentional action.

RAT is founded on the premise that explanations of social action proceed by way of uncovering the processes of rational agency. Negatively speaking, this means deciding that actions are not the result of causes which are not reasons, such as unconscious motivations or domination by collectivist forces. (Føllesdal, 1994, 243) Elster takes RAT to be defined by two principle arguments: (1) structural constraints do not completely determine the actions taken by individuals in a society, and (2) within the feasible set of actions compatible with all the constraints, individuals choose those they believe will bring the best results (and this choice thereby explains the results in terms of actions). (1982, 463-464) RAT is often associated with economic modes of social analysis. About the closely related study of collective action, Russel Hardin, for example, writes, “the argument of the logic of collective action is based on the strong assumption that individual actors are motivated by self-interest – or on the assumption of what I will commonly call narrow rationality or, more briefly, rationality.” (1982, 9) But RAT proponents also need not be dogmatic with regard to the self-interested motivations of social agents. Hardin considers moral motivations as well as contractarians (people who play fairly for its own sake) in his analysis of collective action.<sup>18</sup> (1982, 102) That said, such considerations are exceptions which define the scope and intent of RAT. Hardin calls them “extrarational intrusions into the analysis of collective action” and concludes, despite their unwieldy presence in the model, that “rational action is intentional action par excellence.” (1982, 102) More to the point, Hardin’s very goal in *Collective Action* is to problematize Adam Smith’s presumption that self-interested rational actors naturally secure individual as well as collective interests; Hardin’s goal is to add considerations of the “back of the invisible hand” to traditional economic models. (1982,

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<sup>18</sup> See also Hardin’s more recent work, which focuses more exclusively on the study of exceptions to models of self-interested motivation.



6) Despite his unwillingness to be dogmatic about rational action, therefore, his entire mode of analysis orbits around it.

Elster's dissatisfaction with RAT stems from its operative "thin theory" of rationality. Thin theories of rationality take individuals' reasons for action for granted and tend to consider consistency with the sum of one's beliefs and desires sufficient for rationality. Prisoner's Dilemma problems often utilize a thin theory of rationality, inasmuch as the "dominant" decision strategies (i.e. the one that is rational under any of the given circumstances) they identify are instrumental with respect to the given ends and purposes of the players.<sup>19</sup> But such considerations are both descriptively and normatively incomplete, Elster argues. Thin theories of rationality are not useful guides for games with no unique solution, such as "Chicken,"<sup>20</sup> nor can they account for situations in which limited amounts of time bound rationality considerations. The nonunicity of optimal strategies in such situations requires theoretical explanation to move beyond the realm of individual rationality, Elster argues. (1994, 317-318) More broadly, Elster points to a wealth of studies demonstrating the pervasiveness of non-rational tendencies – such as Kahneman and Tversky's identification of frequently irrational probability assessments (1982) –

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<sup>19</sup> The model works this way: two prisoners are interrogated separately. If they do not confess to a crime, each prisoner is sentenced to one year in prison. The police, however, offer a deal to each prisoner individually: if one turns state's witness upon the other, she will be set free and the other will be sentenced to 10 years in jail. The twist is that if each prisoner informs, both will be sent to jail for six years. The model is intended to aid the identification of dominant decision strategies for each prisoner, given the assumption that the prisoners cannot collaborate with one another. The goal is also to demonstrate the potentially undesirable outcomes of individually rational action. Numerical scores are given to outcomes generated by the choices of both prisoners, showing that, while both prisoners would be better off if neither informed, the dominant strategy is to inform. Complexities such as iterated and many-person Prisoner's Dilemmas are added in order to make the model more closely resemble actual decision making situations. (In the iterated version, players make choices in light of knowing past outcomes; the situation is dynamic rather than "one-shot," in other words. Many-person models include groups but still only consider rational calculations at the individual level.) Real-life examples of Prisoner's Dilemmas often have to do with public goods; in a characteristic example, Elster shows that for a worker, assuming selfish motivations, it is better to remain non-unionized than to join a union, even if the best case scenario is one in which all join the union. (2007, 319)

<sup>20</sup> Based on the (mythical?) 1950s show of adolescent courage in which drivers race two cars toward each other, the first of which to swerve in order to avoid a head-on collision being considered a chicken.

in order to show the limitations of RAT.<sup>21</sup> One position towards which such considerations encourage us to move is game theory, Elster believes, which studies individuals in light of their expectations of one another's intentional content. Another direction Elster moves in order to supplement or displace elements of RAT is toward considerations of the causal origins of intentional content itself. It is this move that I will evaluate.

Put simply, accounts of individuals acting rationally simply do not describe enough of what social agents do, Elster argues. Nor do they offer us normative guidance in a great many typical situations. (1985, 2) But where a thin theory of rationality gives us too little, Elster resists the thick claim that rational beliefs are those that are true as such and rational desires those that are good as such. He concludes, then, "that between the thin theory of the rational and the full theory of the true and the good there is room and need for a broad theory of the rational." This approach "evaluate[s] the broad rationality of beliefs and desires by looking at the way in which they are shaped." (1985, 15) Elster's goal, in other words, is to work in service of a thicker theory of rationality by considering the causal origins of intentional content. All intentional content has causal origins; the question, he believes, is whether the processes of those causal origins are the *right ones*. (1985, 16) At stake is whether beliefs are formed in light of evidence in the right way, that is, because of the evidence itself. Desires caused in the right way, analogously, are those created through autonomous causal processes. It follows that one may have irrational true beliefs (based on the wrong evidence) or irrational good desires (moral desires formed non-autonomously). (1985, 16) In *Sour Grapes*, Elster proposes to work towards this theory of rationality negatively, by identifying two mechanisms contributing to the "wrong" sort of causal origins of intentional content: non-autonomous processes of desire formation and processes which contribute to ungrounded belief formation. (1985, 16)

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<sup>21</sup> One could also add more damning studies to the list, such as Green and Shapiro's *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

I will focus on what Elster considers to be a principle example of the wrong sort of desire-formation: the phenomenon of “sour grapes.”<sup>22</sup> Sour grapes are non-rational mental causes of action. They are a mechanism meant to explain non-autonomous desire formation, in Elster’s terms. The mechanism in question is what he calls “adaptive preference formation,” or the fitting of desires to possibilities, the concept of which Elster derives from Aesop’s fable of the fox who rationalizes his unfulfilled desire for high-hanging grapes by saying, “they’re sour anyway!” Adaptive preference formations are themselves mechanisms, Elster supposes, for “dissonance reduction” in individuals.<sup>23</sup> (1985, 110) Alongside his analysis of “states that are essentially by-products,” (e.g. generally desirable states which one cannot achieve through intention or will, such as falling asleep, believing, “becoming natural,” or forgetting<sup>24</sup> (1985, 45-48 and 51)), the analysis of sour grapes is meant to show that individual rationality calculations cannot account for a wide range of common human social phenomena. Sour grapes are an instance, Elster argues, of “purely causal” desire formations. It is a phenomenon that happens “behind our backs.” Crucially, however, because Elster is committed to intentional explanation, such “purely causal” mechanisms must still be, in some sense, mental events. Elster calls them psychic drives, about which more in a moment. (1985, 117)

The benefit of Elster’s mixed causal/intentional model is that it elucidates the importance of spelling out the microprocesses of social action. I endorse some of Elster’s vocabulary with regard to such microprocesses but am wary of his typical demand for “mechanisms,” which have a ring of nomological universality about which even Elster himself is cautious.<sup>25</sup> Mechanisms, according to Elster, are “frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal patterns that are

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<sup>22</sup> What sour grapes do for desire-formation, rationalization and selective scanning of evidence do for perception and belief-formation, for example. (1985, 123 and 153)

<sup>23</sup> Dissonance reduction describes the state of tension in individuals due to the discrepancy between what one desires or holds to be true and what one knows to be true.

<sup>24</sup> See Chapters Three and Four for more on states that are essentially by-products.

<sup>25</sup> General laws of social behavior are usually too opaque to have much explanatory power, Elster argues; such laws must be spelled out in terms of the causal chains of action they purportedly determine. (2007, 35) This attitude seems to motivate his extensive studies of Marx, for example, where one could interpret Elster’s goal to be the replacement of unargued and vague nomological assertions with explanations of fine-grained causal processes, when they are available.

triggered under generally unknown conditions or with indeterminate consequences.” (2007, 36) Identifying mechanisms allows explanations to reduce the “causal gap” between *explanans* and *explanandum*; they provide continuous chains of causal links. (1983, 24) I can say, Elster points out, that a particular disease is always followed by death, but I cannot therefore assume that a person who had this disease necessarily died from it. (2007, 32) To say so requires an identification of the causal chain leading from the disease to death. Such “causal chains” strike me as no different from causal processes, however. As such, I can see no reason why it does significant harm to Elster’s account to replace the term “mechanism” with “microprocess.” From here on, then, and in Chapter Three in particular, I will discuss the importance of identifying the microprocesses of social action. Elster’s ultimate objective is to offer the most fine-grained explanation possible of the causal chains involved in social action. I endorse this goal. If nomological mechanistic generalizations about the microprocesses of social action turn out to be possible, then this would be all the better for social theory (though I am doubtful that this will happen).

The importance of identifying the microprocesses of social action is clearly demonstrated through the failures of functionalist approaches to explanation. I will briefly spell out the reasons why functional explanations are largely unsatisfying, not only because these reasons represent the benefits of Elster’s mixed causal/intentional model of explanation, but also because Elster’s critique of Bourdieu, which figures heavily in the next chapter, is founded on Elster’s claim that Bourdieu’s theory of practical sense is a functionalist one. I want to endorse the critique of functionalism, but show (in the next chapter) that it does not apply to Bourdieu’s model of social action.

Functionalism, put simply, explains social phenomena according to their function, that is, their purpose or ends. Functionalist explanations may have stronger and weaker variants,<sup>26</sup> but

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<sup>26</sup> Elster defines the “Weak Functionalist Paradigm” as the claim that “an institution or behavioral pattern often has consequences that are (a) beneficial for some dominant economic or political structure; (b)

their common assumption, according to Elster, is that, “the latent functions (if any) of an institution or behavior explain the presence of that institution or behavior.” (1982, 454) Just as one might explain the actions of a heart in terms of its function in the circulatory system of the body, a functionalist account of, say, religion, might explain the phenomenon with reference to its perpetuation of class structure (as in the caricature of Marx’s position). Elster’s most obviously correct claim against functionalism is that it simply inverts cause and effect, attempting to explain a cause by its effect. This is, of course, incoherent on the assumption that all explanations are explanations of the causal process which led to an action or event. Elster’s more complex and controversial claim is that functionalist explanations fall prey to the problem of epiphenomena, for they cannot distinguish true from spurious causal correlations between an event and an effect. (1994, 411 and 1983, 67) Elster is not alone in making this point.

Functionalism and structuralism share a problematic gap in accounting for the local events through which macrosocial processes are reproduced. Anthony Giddens, for example, argues that “a ‘structural approach’ to the social sciences cannot be severed from an examination of the mechanisms of social reproduction.” (1986, 212) In a similar vein, James Bohman argues, against Bourdieu, that holistic conceptions of cultural practices require accounts of individual microprocesses.<sup>27</sup> (1999, footnote 150) Pettit’s “programming model” of explanation fails to account for the microprocesses of social reproduction for similar reasons. Pettit argues that higher-order states “program for,” or “probabilify,” lower-order states. (1996, 36-37). States of mind program for brain states and social properties program for individual actions analogously. Pettit’s goal is to avoid brutally causal forms of explanation which, with regard to the individual/social relation, depict the latter as “overriding” or “outflanking” the former. To say that some higher-order state “makes it the case that” some lower order state exists is a

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unintended by the actors; and (c) not recognized by the beneficiaries as owing to that behavior,” and the “Strong Functionalist Paradigm” as the claim that “all institutions or behavioral patterns have a function that explains their presence.” (1982, 454)

<sup>27</sup> Bohman’s critique of Bourdieu is unfounded, I believe, based on an intentional conflation of Bourdieu’s theory of the logic of practice and structuralism.

functionalist claim, and it fails for familiar reasons. If Pettit's claim is to avoid the problems associated with functionalism outlined by Elster, Pettit must tell us *how* higher-order states program for lower-order states. John Christman writes:

On Pettit's view, X is a good explanation for Y when X "directs us toward a cause" of Y (pp. 229-30); that is, it provides some causally relevant information about Y. So some structurally described event (a fall in unemployment) might explain some later event (the rise in crime) because the former programs for some lower-order series of events (various actions by individuals) that will result in the event to be explained. But this ecumenism is plausible only if we believe that we have new information of a causally relevant sort when we are told that a fall in unemployment has caused the rise in crime. Pettit thinks we do because the first event 'ensures' (that is, programs for) some lower-order event sequence or other that will bring the explanandum about. But since it is obscure just how the higher-order, structural event 'ensures' the lower order one, or just what sort of lower-order event is involved, it is unclear what information has been provided. I could say, for example, that the prevalence of Catholicism explains the President's low approval ratings. But I have provided an authentic, non-spurious, explanation only if I can, in principle, provide a story about the relationship between Catholicism and whatever micro events actually cause the lower approval ratings. Saying they ensure that there are such events doesn't help us. (1996, 94)

Some functionalist explanations do purport to tell a story about the relationship between an event or an action and its effects. G.A. Cohen agrees with Elster that one cannot simply invert cause and effect and thus explain an event or an action because it had a certain effect. Instead, Cohen's view is that a functional explanation is an explanation in which a "dispositional fact" explains the occurrence of an event or action. (1982, "Marxism," 486) Put in other words: some phenomenon occurs because of its propensity to have a certain effect. (1994, 392) I do not wish to defend Cohen's account of functional explanation per se, but his view is worth brief examination because it exemplifies an important ecumenical attitude toward the meaning of fine-grained explanations. Cohen's story about the relationship between a social action and its effect helps set the stage for my arguments to come in the next chapter. For while Elster is right to demand fine-grained explanations that can make sense of the causal sequence of events which lead up to an effect, his account of those events is too narrowly defined in terms of mental intentionality.

Elster's debate with Cohen about the validity of functional explanations centers on the nature of Marx's arguments for historical materialism. Cohen's claim is typified in the following example. One can explain Marx's view about the relationship between increases in the scale of technology and increases in economies of scale by suggesting, Cohen argues, that "the increase in scale occurred because the industry was of a sort in which increases in scale yield economies." (Cohen, 1994, 392) Cohen's "consequence laws" are meant to capture this intuition; he argues that when some social phenomenon is useful, it comes to exist. Symbolically, the form of all consequence laws is, "if (if A, then B), then A."<sup>28</sup> (Cohen, 1978, 259) Consequence laws allow us to say that functional explanations are legitimate even when we lack a full elaboration of their mechanisms of reproduction. In one sense, consequence laws place social science in a position analogous to that of pre-Darwinian theories of evolution, which were legitimate but incomplete, Cohen argues. (1994, 395)

The essence of Cohen's claim, then, can be summarized this way: while knowledge of the microprocesses of social action may be a sufficient condition for a successful explanation, and the existence of such microprocesses is necessary, the knowledge of such microprocesses is not necessary. Cohen writes, "we do not have to know the mechanism to be confident of a functional explanation because we do not have to know the mechanism to be confident of a causal explanation." (1982, "Reply," 132) It is crucial to note, however, that Cohen concedes the point to Elster that social science would be better off in a position analogous to post-Darwinian natural science, if or when that becomes possible. Cohen's point, though, is that valid non-spurious explanations of social action can be given without knowledge of how a given action or event is caused. This is not because causal knowledge is unimportant. It is because explanations which aim at ideally causal knowledge are valid in light of many kinds of intermediate evidence. Cohen believes that what he calls "functional elaborations" can create valid explanations prior to the

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<sup>28</sup> Or, as Cohen puts it: "A consequence law is a universal conditional statement whose antecedent is a hypothetical causal statement." (1978, 259)

identification of the causal antecedents of an event or action. These elaborations are details about an event or action which contribute incrementally to the validity of a functional explanation.

Cohen puts the point about functional elaborations this way:

Suppose, for example, that Elster and I notice a dead body in the library of the country house the morning after the dinner party, and that we hypothesize that its owner died because of something he ate the night before. Further research can take either of two forms. We might open him up to see whether there are any poisons in him, which would be analogous to what Elster thinks we must do to back up functional explanations, or we might find out what he ate, what other guests ate, and which other guests took ill or died, and that would be analogous to the way I saw we can proceed with functional explanations. In my procedure we look for appropriately consonant and discrepant parallel instances. In Elster's we rely on pre-existing knowledge about parallel instances at a more basic causal level and we look for a mechanism in the given case that is consonant with that knowledge. (1982, "Marxism," 491)

In *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, Cohen discusses a number of functional elaborations which expand the class of explanatory devices beyond consonant and parallel cases. Crucially, he discusses purposive elaborations which are not found in the conscious intentions of individual social actors. The macrosocial influence of a competitive economy is one such elaboration which still makes sense of the purposive actions of individuals, according to Cohen, as is the phenomenon of self-deception. (1978, 287-289) On Cohen's lights, functional elaborations don't violate the intuition that all explanations are ultimately causal explanations.<sup>29</sup> Instead, they add the corollary that an incomplete knowledge of the causal antecedents of an action can in fact be explanatory if accompanied by sufficient functional elaborations. More broadly, one could interpret Cohen's claim to be that complete knowledge of causal microprocesses is difficult, if not impossible, to identify. Non-spurious explanations, then, are a matter of degree rather than kind. It is not the case that we simply have the microprocesses or not. Rather, the class of devices we consider to be explanatory must be expanded. Interpreting Cohen and Elster's debate this way allows me to support Elster's point that explanations of social action require both the existence

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<sup>29</sup> He claims that functional explanation is a variety of causal explanation. (1982, "Reply," 130)



and knowledge of causal microprocesses. But it also allows me to challenge Elster's assessment of what counts as a microprocess as well as what counts as knowledge of one.

The validity of Cohen's particular elaborations is perhaps debatable, as is his assumption that all explanatory elaborations are functional elaborations. For my purposes, the key point is not about Cohen's defense of functional explanation per se. The key point is that Cohen offers good reasons to be ecumenical about the character and identity of the microprocesses of social action. Complete explanations rely upon the identification of causal microprocesses.<sup>30</sup> Elster et al's critique of functionalism shows why this identification is important. We do not know with complete certainty about the cause of death in Cohen's example until we follow Elster's method and open up the cadaver. The question at stake is what this process of "opening up the cadaver" means with respect to social action. I suggest that having a fine-grained explanation means identifying the microprocesses that cause an action, but that those microprocesses ought not to be narrowly defined. Elster, by contrast, narrowly identifies the microprocesses of social action with the mental intentions of individuals and the various irrational "intrusions" upon them. This is a problematic view not simply because narrowness is normatively unattractive in general. Cohen's more ecumenical stance toward the nature of microprocesses is superior to Elster's narrow view because the latter rests on deeply problematic assumptions about the nature of intentionality.

How?

The "feedback mechanisms" for which Elster believes functionalism fails to account are causal microprocesses elaborating the effects of social properties on the mental contents of individuals.<sup>31</sup> (1994, 405) Functionalist explanations therefore posit, in Elster's view, a "purpose without a purposive actor," or a "predicate without a subject;" they think in terms of the passive voice. (1982, 454) "Sour grapes" is one such mechanism. It informs Elster's rejection of RAT, which is based on the claim that social behavior is often generated by irrational intentional causes

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<sup>30</sup> Although it may be unclear when completeness is reached.

<sup>31</sup> Feedback mechanisms are akin to sexual selection in processes of natural evolution.

such as adaptive preference formation, which he calls a “psychic drive.” (1985, 117) Elster defines drives as non-conscious psychic forces geared toward short-term pleasure. Drives are the principle source of the distortions of the rationality of beliefs and desires. (1985, 25) The question is: how do we square Elster’s focus on intentional content with his account of non-conscious psychic drives?

Unfortunately, the conceptual status of such drives is deeply uncertain with respect to the agent whose actions they determine. The problem facing Elster’s account of psychic drives is that they are intelligible only in terms of one of two impermissible possibilities. On his lights, either psychic drives are themselves conscious mental content of which agents are aware and regarding which rational action considerations apply, or psychic drives are causal forces which, in Pettit’s terms, override or outflank intentional content. Elster clearly does not mean the former, for his critique of RAT stands on the claim that many desires are formed in the wrong way, that is, non-autonomously or “behind our backs.” Psychic drives look far more like causal determinants of intentional content, however this latter option conflicts with Elster’s critique of functionalist explanations. It posits a “purpose without a purposive actor” or a “predicate without a subject.” Because they do not operate on the order of reasons, psychic drives are a phenomenological place-holder for observable processes. But what kind of process are they? Understood as a causal force, psychic drives are defined by their function, which is impermissible on Elster’s lights. Barring a third possibility capable of explaining the status of psychic drives in terms irreducible to brute causes or transparent reasons, Elster’s account is incomplete at best and incoherent at worst. It is parasitic upon two models of social action neither of which Elster is free to endorse.

Beyond the coherence of Elster’s own story, the worrying ambiguity of psychic drives points toward a problem inherent to social explanation founded exclusively on the concepts of reasons and causes, whether we are speaking of psychological, sociological, *or* mixed causal/intentional models. Elster’s nuanced MI rejects what Bourdieu would call the

intellectualism of RAT, but his account of irrationality throws social explanation back upon an undeveloped model of causality. Surely Elster would not endorse a sociological account of causality which would explain drives in terms of social determinations rather than psychic forces, nor would he be content to give a functionalist explanation of them. Elster is committed to intentional explanation, but then the meaning of the term *psychic force* is deeply ambiguous, for Elster's concept of psychic forces is by definition inassimilable to cogent mental content. Elster's problem is indicative of a broader insufficiency in the concepts themselves; reasons and causes seem to represent flip sides of the same coin. At the margins of their own models, reasons do the work causes cannot, and causes do the work reasons cannot.

The equivalence Elster draws between an agent's beliefs and desires, her cogitations, and her choices is also ambiguous, and for similar reasons. All three stand for transparent psychological processes that are acceptable and central for intentional explanation. But this is a highly austere picture. Considering these phenomena sequentially, one could show causal social "intrusions" at each level. As Burge shows, the content of beliefs and desires may be individuated by social context. Second, the *style* of an agent's cogitations upon her beliefs and desires is very plausibly learned in highly differentiated social settings. (What are philosophy professors doing if not teaching a style of cogitating upon one's beliefs and desires?) And again, the choices one makes when acting may also be dependent on a whole host of trivial and non-intentional factors – as trivial as the weather at the given moment of choice – a fact to which the voluminous literature on *akrasia* attests. None of these suggestions need be absolutely correct in order for one to wonder why Elster ignores them in his account of irrational psychic processes. (I am not suggesting that these social factors represent irrational causes of belief/desire formation, cogitation, and choice; I am suggesting that they *ought* to be on Elster's lights.) I submit that he does because, on the basis of a narrow reason/cause schema of explanation, what would appear to the untrained (or non-doctrinaire) eye as ordinary and non-nefarious social conditions of individual action must be reduced to either transparent psychological processes or brute causes.

Without evidence to the contrary, I see no reason to believe that pervasive phenomena such as stereotypes, for example – which would seem to be good candidates for the wrong sort of causes of intentional content – will be readily explained by a yet-to-be named psychic drive. But in order to explain them, and to do so without falling back into unacceptable varieties of functionalist or collectivist explanation, some alternative must be found. As I have argued, Elster is right to demand fine-grained explanations. He is right that identifying the microprocesses of social action will help us to eliminate spurious explanations. But there is ultimately no convincing reason to identify fine-grained explanations with intentional psychology, and to locate rationality at the intersection of such psychology with its causal, yet psychic, determinants.

In the next chapter, I will argue that Bourdieu's model of intelligent action can do much of the explanatory work that Elster's mixed causal/intentional model cannot. That is, it provides an account of the microprocesses of social action required by fine-grained explanations, but one that avoids the pitfalls of the problematically narrow explanatory schema of reasons and causes. I will argue, furthermore, that a model like Bourdieu's is consistent with the various metaphysical and methodological commitments I have made thus far. It is monistic and compatible with the idea that social properties supervene upon individuals. It requires no "unexplained explainers" or special forces and is thus quite distinct from collectivist forms of explanation. More importantly, I will show that an account of social action based on the practical understanding of social actors is *explanatory*. It resists calls made by some social theorists to go "fully interpretive." Then, having shown that this account is up to the task of social explanation, I will move forward to explore its role in assessing normative social theories and making them more efficacious.

## Intelligent Action

We are *disposed* because  
we are *exposed*.

-Bourdieu, *Pascalian  
Meditations*, 141

Philosophers who are interested in social action, I will argue in this chapter, must not ignore the study of skilled behavior. Explanatory accounts of social action must recognize the distinction between intelligent action, in the special sense I will describe, and action defined by mental intentionality. For it is the former, I will argue, that makes sense of the ordinary social skills which make social action possible. Phenomenological accounts of skilled “non-mentalistic” action have been developed in a number of scholarly domains, most recently and prominently by existential philosophers such as Dreyfus. I discuss Dreyfus’ arguments at length in Chapter Four (and more sparingly in this chapter). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s psychological study of “optimal experience” in his book *Flow* develops an account of mindless coping skills from yet another perspective, which I will also discuss in the next chapter. In this chapter, I will focus on Bourdieu because his theory of practical sense represents the most well developed account of ordinary intelligent action based on the practical understanding of social actors to my knowledge.

I will claim that Bourdieu’s account of embodied motivated behavior, or “bodily knowledge,” provides an explanatory account of the microprocesses of social action. I do not mean to suggest that bodily knowledge is *the* explainer of social action. Rather, I want to suggest

that Bourdieu puts forward a plausible and coherent explanatory model of social action. Put crudely, some of our deepest dispositions to act, as Bourdieu argues, are in our bodies. The importance of this claim in light of my arguments in Chapter Two is that knowing the microprocesses of social action enables social theorists to distinguish explanatory from spurious accounts of action, as Elster claimed against Cohen. The study of bodily knowledge is a fruitful source for this knowledge.

In his discussion and critique of twentieth century behaviorism, Rosenberg identifies three requirements for an of social behavior which is both successful and not founded on the primacy of mental intentionality. These features are applicable to Bourdieu's theory of practical sense. According to Rosenberg, the onus is on behaviorist explanations of social action to identify environmental stimuli, reinforcers for learned and operant behavior, and to demonstrate that none of these are intentional. (2008, 77) Assuming that we distinguish intentionality in general and mental intentionality (which is surely contrary to Rosenberg's wishes), one might analogously suggest that Bourdieu's theory of practical sense must identify environmental stimuli, reinforcers for learned behavior and something analogous to operant behavior, and it must demonstrate that none of these are caused by mental intentional content. I will argue that Bourdieu meets this challenge. What he calls social fields represent environmental stimuli; the relationship between those social fields and what Bourdieu calls *habitus* acts as a reinforcer of learned behavior; and embodied social skills represent intelligent, rather than operant, behavior.

As I will show, Bourdieu's theory is built upon a rejection of accounts of social action which are quite similar to those against which I argued in Chapter Two. Those are accounts, as Bourdieu puts it, which either admit only reason (and are therefore akin to what I have called intentional models of explanation) or exclude reason altogether (and are therefore akin to what I have called "brutely" sociological models of explanation). Bourdieu's key insight in the attempt to move beyond these explanatory options is that individual actions and macro-level social processes intersect in our bodies. In a well-known and central passage, Bourdieu writes:

Adapting a phrase of Proust's, one might say that arms and legs are full of numb imperatives. One could endlessly enumerate the values given body, *made* body, by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy which can instil [sic] a whole cosmology, through injunctions as insignificant as 'sit up straight' or 'don't hold your knife in your left hand,' and inscribe the most fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of a culture in seemingly innocuous details of bearing or physical and verbal manners, so putting them beyond the reach of consciousness and explicit statement. (1990, *Logic*, 69)

It is my intention to make sense of this central passage in what follows, and to show why it helps to ameliorate shortcomings in social theory. To do so, I will first give a brief exegesis of Heidegger's arguments about practical understanding, which I believe are key background concepts organizing Bourdieu's approach to social theory. I will then attempt to explain Bourdieu's central concepts of *habitus* and "field." I will argue, contra Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, that Bourdieu's account of social action is intended to explain, and not only interpret, social action, and that this intention is justifiable. Having shown that Bourdieu's task is explanatory, I will then lay out his conception of embodied motivated behavior, which I believe utilizes a conception of the body best articulated by Merleau-Ponty. I will attempt to show, centrally, that the idea of bodily knowledge – with its "calls to order," as Bourdieu put it above – helps to explain ordinary intelligent social action without running afoul of the critique of explanation by way of reasons or causes. Finally, I will briefly discuss Bourdieu's key concept of *illusio*, or investment in the stakes of social games. This concept is particularly important for my arguments about normative accounts of social action in the chapters to come.

### *Heidegger, Intentionality, and the Social World*

In what follows, I will attempt to show that Heidegger helps to articulate two central claims about intelligent action that are required by my response to problems in explanatory

accounts of social action: first, that practical understanding “founds” higher-order mental intentionality and is therefore constitutive of intelligent action whereas the latter – mental intentionality – is not; second, that practical understanding is derived from the normativity of the social world, or what Heidegger calls *Das Man*. In the next section, then, I will introduce my understanding of Bourdieu, who I take to be applying something like these two claims to the basic formulation of social theory. I will not argue explicitly that Bourdieu adopts Heidegger’s claims. My purpose is not to make an historical argument or a scholarly claim about Bourdieu as such, but rather to show why his account of practical sense helps to explain social action.

Heidegger offered the first and the most well developed account of the mindless coping skills required by ordinary social action. His argument that human beings first and foremost experience the world as “available” (*zuhanden*) for use gives the most rigorous, although utterly abstract, argument for the priority of practical understanding. In Dreyfus’ words, it amounts to the claim that “‘mindless’ everyday coping skills [are] the basis of all intelligibility.” (2001, *BITW*, 3) Heidegger argues that our understanding of entities in the world is founded by our largely non-cognitive, largely practical involvement with them. To have an understanding at all is not to know *about* something, on Heidegger’s lights, nor does it mean to know *that* something is the case. Having an “understanding of being” is nothing like having “a bare perceptual cognition,” (1962, 95) according to Heidegger, but instead means knowing *how* to act – or cope – intelligently with entities in the world.<sup>32</sup> Human beings, Heidegger argues, are always in the process of existing in practical situations, and we generally relate to our situations “understandingly.” Acting understandingly can be interpreted as pressing forward into practical possibilities for action.

Heidegger’s well-known example about the use of a hammer is meant to show that ordinary intelligent action requires a practical, but not necessarily conceptual, understanding of one’s environment. Unless the hammer is broken or unusual in some way, he argues, one rarely

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<sup>32</sup> Heidegger is reminiscent of Dewey on this point. See Chapter Five.



take note of the fact that it “is” a hammer, let alone does one form a mental representation of the hammer’s color, shape or perceptual qualities. Heidegger’s ontological interest is in the modes of being in which entities “show up in the world.” Phenomenologically, the hammer shows up first and foremost as something to be used, not as something to be considered, represented, believed in, or subjected to judgment. This distinction, between a bare present thing, and something that is available for use, founds Heidegger’s claim about the priority of practical understanding and the derivative status of higher-order mental intentionality.

One understands a hammer, and exhibits something like practical sense, by knowing how to use the hammer *as* a hammer. (This is what Heidegger means by the “as-structure” of understanding. More on the “as-structure” in Chapter Four.) This is why Heidegger talks about understanding as having an understanding of *being*. Existence, on Heidegger’s lights, is not principally a matter of presence – *that* the hammer *is* – but rather, existence is, “first and foremost,” as Heidegger puts it, a quality derived from our involvement in the world. I do not understand what a hammer *is* if I use it comb my hair. Heidegger denotes these two ways of relating to the hammer – as something to be used to hit nails, or as a present object with qualities – with the terms *Zuhandenheit*, meaning “available” or “ready-to-hand,” and *Vorhandenheit*, meaning “occurrent” or “present-to-hand.” Arguing that the latter is a derivative form of the former, he writes:

In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a ‘signification’ over some naked thing which is present-at-hand . . . but [rather] when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by the interpretation. (1962, 190-191)

Although later (in Chapter Four) I will develop a more nuanced view of what Heidegger means by “interpretation,” here it suffices to suggest that Heidegger is talking generally about the relationship between ordinary involved activity – that is, activity characterized by having a

practical understanding of entities – and second-order, derivative modes of relating to entities in the world. Cognizing and knowing are central examples of derivative modes of “being-in-the-world,” according to Heidegger.

The purpose of the example is to show that our ordinary practical comportment toward entities in the world is intelligent but not necessarily characterized by mental intentionality. An ambiguity in the word “intentional” may in fact serve to clarify this point. It is an ambiguity that traces back to Edmund Husserl. Husserl showed that perceptual consciousness is characterized by what he called intentionality, but he did not use the word to refer to desires or purposes. Instead, by saying that consciousness is intentional, Husserl meant that human consciousness is characterized by being “about” things. Our perceptions, in other words, are turned toward things in the world, and not, as he thought the tradition had it, toward the content of one’s own mind. Looking out my window, I perceive buildings and cars, for example, not the raw data of colors and shapes. Husserl’s sense of intentionality is different in an important way from what I have called mental intentionality. The latter describes mental content – usually beliefs and desires – which is capable of taking propositional form. Rosenberg typifies this interpretation, stating (rather than arguing) that intentional content is by definition propositional. (2008, 52) While Rosenberg may be right that there cannot be a belief without a proposition believed, he is wrong to suggest that the content of all intentional states is propositional. Although Husserl’s study of intentionality – understood as “aboutness” – orbited around a study of consciousness, Heidegger takes over the term in order to show that *ordinary intelligent action is driven by a more fundamental kind of intentionality than the intentions one has in mind*. Merleau-Ponty calls this more basic form of intentionality “motor intentionality.” It is this basic form of intentionality, which supplants a mentalistic understanding of action and agency, of which I am arguing social theory must take note.<sup>33</sup> Thus, when Rosenberg suggests that intentionality is what turns mere

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<sup>33</sup> Some scholars distinguish Heidegger’s sense of intentionality (as “aboutness”) from mental intentionality by spelling the former as “intensionality.” I choose not to do so in order to highlight what I take to be at

behavior into action (2008, 56), I agree with him nominally. Intentionality *does* turn behavior into action, but not only in the usual sense that mental propositions are causes of action.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that the mentalistic picture of human experience that has dominated the Western philosophical tradition is parasitic upon our primary way of being involved in the world. *Being and Time* makes a transcendental argument: the condition of possibility for the view of human experience the sum of which we might call Cartesian, is the background of practical coping skills that enable human beings to live in the world “understandingly.” The Cartesian tradition Heidegger attacks predates Descartes (it begins ostensibly with Plato) and extends through Kant and Hegel, Husserl and his phenomenology of consciousness (against whose lingering mentalism Heidegger lays out his fundamental ontology), and would seem to include many of the contemporary accounts of social action under study in this dissertation. I make no such historical claim, but instead consider the ramifications for social theory of what I take to be Heidegger’s most forceful, if abstract, claim.

The second central theme of particular relevance to Bourdieu and to an explanatory account of social action based upon the practical understanding of social actions is Heidegger’s conception of *Das Man*. Alternately translated as “the they” or “the one,” *Das Man* articulates practical understanding in terms of average, everyday intelligibility. *Das Man* tells each of us what “one” does in any given situation. It represents the mundane intelligibility of the social world that gives content to intelligent mindless coping. Knowing how to use the hammer as a hammer is an expression of the socially-structured intelligibility given to each of us in our practical know-how, for example. One uses a hammer understandingly when one uses a hammer as *one* should. Although Heidegger’s concern with authenticity sometimes gives *Das Man*’s mundane intelligibility an ethical pallor, for my purposes, it is better to view *Das Man* as a

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the core of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty’s claims, that mental intentionality is a derivative form of intentionality as “aboutness.” The most basic fact about intentionality is that human beings are ordinarily *turned toward the world* (and not, for instance, turned toward the content of their own minds). Because the literature I will be discussing uses the term intentionality and intentions to refer to mental content, however, I will specify when I mean something different, such as motor intentionality.

phenomenon required by intelligent coping itself and not as something for which one ought or ought not to strive. Ordinary action presupposes the existence of a normative social world as expressed in Heidegger's conception of *Das Man*. Bourdieu's model of *habitus* and field appears to be derived from this view.

### *Habitus and Field*

As I've mentioned, Bourdieu's sociology is founded on a rejection of causal and intentional models of explanation as they have taken shape in the French intellectual tradition. Bourdieu ceaselessly attacks objectivism (which he often identifies with Levi-Strauss' structuralism) and intellectualism (a family of theoretical orientations ranging from Kant to Husserlian phenomenology to RAT). The former reduces the social world to a "social physics," Bourdieu argues, which purportedly operates behind the backs of social agents. The latter takes the phenomenology of first person experience for granted, or what Bourdieu calls that "familiarity with the familiar environment . . . which, by definition, does not reflect itself." (1990, *Logic*, 25) Put crudely, objectivism studies the social world from afar, as if its mechanisms of reproduction are not also part of the representations agents have of the social world; intellectualism, on the other hand, assumes that the social world is simply the aggregate of those representations.<sup>34</sup> (2000, 188) Through these rejections, Bourdieu intends to avoid any image of social behavior as mechanical submission to force or as only the outcome of intentional reasoning. Loic Wacquant summarizes, "Bourdieu seeks to overcome the debilitating reduction of sociology to either an

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<sup>34</sup> Interestingly (and consistently in light of his critical interests), Bourdieu attributes objectivist and intellectualist prejudices to the social conditions of those with whom such positions are typically associated: whereas outside observers (i.e. social scientists) find the subjective experiences of social agents mysterious and are therefore led to objectify those experiences, participants in ordinary social games tend to resist objectification, no doubt, Bourdieu believes, because the scholastic point of view is largely inaccessible within practice. (2000, 188-189)

objectivist physics of material structures or a constructivist phenomenology of cognitive forms.” (1992, 5)

But Bourdieu does not reject the intuitions of objectivism and intellectualism outright. Wacquant writes that, on Bourdieu’s lights, the social universe must be understood as having two dimensions: “an objective structure, grasped from the outside, whose articulations can be materially observed, measured and mapped out independently of the representations of those who live in it” *and* the phenomenal world that is “given as immediately familiar and meaningful.” (1992, 7-9) Bourdieu seeks to write “a *unified political economy of practice* . . . that effectively welds phenomenological and structural approaches,” Wacquant continues (1992, 4), maintaining from the former the phenomenology of individual experience and from the latter the objective conditions of possibility for having those experiences. The purpose of social theory, then, is to map the interaction of objective conditions and their internalization in individuals. Looking forward, this model is intended to avoid the pitfalls of intellectualism because it recognizes that the possibilities for action given to social agents are constrained and perhaps even constituted by objective factors. However, contrary to all forms of objectivism, the model is meant to show that such constraining factors are both constructed by individual action and also enable action.<sup>35</sup>

Explaining this intuition, Bourdieu writes:

The theory of practice as practice insists, contrary to positive materialism, that the objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded, and, contrary to intellectualist idealism, that the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, the *habitus*, which is constituted in practice and is always oriented toward practical functions. (1990, *Logic*, 52)

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<sup>35</sup> Playing a piano, Bourdieu suggests, is a good metaphor for this aspect of social action. A pianist is constrained by the very elements – the number of keys for example – that enable her to play in the first place. There would be no piano without a finite set of keys. (2000, 116)

What Bourdieu calls *habitus* and field create a generative as well as constraining model of social action. *Habitus* is the theoretical structure Bourdieu uses to explain the relationship between social conditions and individual actions. Bourdieu defines *habitus* as

a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as *a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems. (1971, 83)

In other words, *habitus* denotes a set of historical relations “deposited” within individual bodies which takes the form of what Bourdieu frequently calls corporeal schemata of “perception, appreciation, and action.” (Wacquant, 1992, 16) It is, put simply, the site of the social construction of social action. *Habitus* is what Bourdieu calls “the internalization of externality,” (1990, *Logic*, 55) that is, the embodiment of socially structured values, tastes, dispositions, norms, etc.

By corporeal schemata, Bourdieu means evaluative perceptions and tastes – for artworks, food, moral values, class consciousness, ad infinitum – which together comprise one’s mundane sense of how the world “hangs together.” *Habitus* is a generative entity, however, and not just a depository for social values. It is generative in the sense that individuals utilize *habitus* homologously across disparate social fields. The capacity of *habitus* to produce infinitely diversified tasks is its key explanatory feature. We are able to perceive artworks, food, moral values, etc according to analogical evaluative schema, according to Bourdieu. Rather than simply replicating values we have been taught mechanically, ordinary social actors are capable of applying *habitus* to new social experiences. One way of defining *habitus*, along these lines, is as a set of transposable dispositions. It is in this sense that *habitus* is generative rather than

mechanical. It is, in a unique sense, creative.<sup>36</sup> On the assumption that habits are static and routine patterns of action, Bourdieu writes, “I said *habitus* so as *not* to say habit.” (1992, 122)

Bourdieu’s intent is to uncover the deep pedagogical practices of culture that enable individuals to act in regular, coherent, and sensible ways. Our embodied schemata of value perception do this work. As the name implies, *habitus* gives individuals a home in the social world, allowing them to assimilate culturally created perceptions and values as their own. “[The social agent] feels at home in the world because the world is also in him,” Bourdieu writes. (2000, 143) This is a rich notion of “social context,” the necessity of which I argued for in the previous chapter.

*Habitus* generates practical sense, and practical sense enables social agents to act intelligently because it operates on very basic levels of ordinary experience, such as identity and self-perception. *Habitus* is meant to show that the social construction of perception operates on the ground floor, so to speak, “below” the level of intentional content (beliefs and desires).<sup>37</sup> With respect to the phenomenon of sour grapes, then, where Elster sees the adjustment of desires to possibilities, Bourdieu sees no adjustment required. What one desires is itself structured by what one perceives to be achievable; the cognitive dissonance of which Elster speaks is, for Bourdieu, a rare and specialized experience.<sup>38</sup> By and large, our *habitus* provides a smooth sync between our beliefs and desires and our perceptions and self-perceptions. The existence of a coherent social world is possible, Bourdieu writes, “because the cognitive structures that [the social agent] implements are the product of incorporation of the structures of the world in which

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<sup>36</sup> I mean creative in the same way that Noam Chomsky does, when he argues that universal grammar is generative and creative. Chomsky says that ordinary language users are creative when using a small number of grammatical rules to construct an infinite number of unique sentences. I will discuss this comparison between Chomsky and Bourdieu again later in this chapter. The key difference to keep in mind between them is that Bourdieu rejects Chomsky’s claim about the universality of grammatical rules.

<sup>37</sup> By speaking of the “ground floor,” and by utilizing this kind of vertical model of consciousness, I do not mean to imply that practical sense is equivalent to a kind of foundationalism. More than a rock-bottom feature of experience, practical sense operates as a background to varieties of more explicit experience. For an account of “the background,” see Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-In-the-World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

<sup>38</sup> One way Bourdieu describes cognitive dissonance is in terms of what he calls “hysteresis.” See Chapter Five for a discussion of this concept.

he acts.” (2000, 135-136) These basic schemata of perception are tied to one’s very identity and self-perception, such that a desire for sour grapes is likely justified *ex post facto* by an attitude such as, “I’m not the kind of person who wants/likes such things.” (Bohman, 1999, 134) The ways in which *habitus* envelops one’s sense of identity does quite a lot of work in the service of making agents “at home” in the social world, and it deeply distinguishes Bourdieu’s account of practical sense from intentional models of social action.

Bourdieu’s theory of practical sense resembles both Heidegger’s argument about the priority of practical understanding over higher-order mental activities as well as his account of *Das Man*, or the undifferentiated public voice that represents the normativity of the social world. Bourdieu’s account resembles Heidegger’s depiction of *Dasein* in two important ways: both views prioritize the practical engagement subjects have with the world, and they do so in a way that shows how intentional content is structured by the normativity of the social world. Bourdieu is not far off from describing “being-in-the-world” when he writes that *habitus* “restores to the agent a generating, unifying, constructing, classifying power, while recalling that this capacity to construct social reality, itself socially constructed, is not that of a transcendental subject but of a socialized body, investing in its practice socially constructed organizing principles that are acquired in the course of a situated and dated social experience.” (2000, 137) Heidegger’s *Dasein*, absorbed in the world of its concern, is a fair, though perhaps problematically abstract, model for Bourdieu’s subject, who is “*pre-occupied* by the world in which it actively intervenes.”<sup>39</sup> (2000, 142)

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<sup>39</sup> There are, of course, important differences between Heidegger and Bourdieu. Principally, where Heidegger intends to give interpretive descriptions of social phenomena, Bourdieu seeks to explain them. Heidegger’s well-known and counter-traditional assessment of the “hermeneutic circle” dispels any notion that his enterprise aspires to garner “evidence” about existentiality. At bottom, Heidegger does not purport to tell us *how things are*. Hermeneutical phenomenology is rather in the business of interpreting the conditions of possibility of the varying ways *that things are* for human beings. As such, Carman argues, Heidegger is not interested in explaining anything. (2007, 17) However, this does not mean that Heidegger’s intuitions cannot help to explain social action.



*Habitus* gives social actors a “bodily knowledge” and a “dexterity” in managing the social world. I will have more to say about the body shortly, for it is the key point in Bourdieu’s account of the microprocesses of social action. The body’s social dexterity, I only want to suggest now, puts the *habitus* squarely in a tradition of “*phronetic*” philosophies, or accounts of practical sense which view intelligent action as something irreducible to propositional knowledge. Bourdieu’s examples focus on athletes because the “somatic compliance” between our bodies and the social world expresses the meaning of the *phronimos*’ know-how. The proper model for social practices is, Bourdieu believes, a game in which the practical mutual understanding of the players enables them to coordinate their actions intelligently without explicit conscious attention. Games exhibit, Bourdieu argues, a “cohesion without concepts.”

The notion of “field” is a necessary compliment to the *habitus*. When he writes that “*habitus* is a virtue made of necessity,” (2007, 372) the “necessity” to which Bourdieu refers are the “stakes inherent” in social fields, such as the field of philosophy, the literary field, the field of motor sports, etc. Social fields are areas of historically structured social activity or “practice.” They are schematized by values which members of a given field must be capable of recognizing and thereby legitimizing.<sup>40</sup> “A field,” Wacquant writes, “consists of a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital).”<sup>41</sup> (1992, 16) It refers both to the totality of actors engaged in an area of social practice as well as to the organizations and institutions involved in that area of social or cultural production. (DiMaggio, 1979, 1463) The field is the principle of division of the social world, taken in a banal way; it is the ordering and organizing force of the *habitus* (in the sense that I am now acting as a philosopher, now as a father, etc). Often Bourdieu speaks of the “conditions of production” of values, tastes, dispositions, norms, etc, in sum, the social conditions of production of *habitus*.

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<sup>40</sup> I do not mean that the mere existence of social skills legitimizes them in a political or ethical sense. I mean that the social agent’s recognition of the stakes inherent in social fields legitimizes the perception one has that those stakes have force. Their normativity as norms is legitimized in the sense that the norms hold.

<sup>41</sup> I will have more to say about the role of capital in Bourdieu’s model shortly.

The field represents these conditions. It represents a background of social structures embodied in institutions, practices, and classes in virtue of which individuals' beliefs, desires, and intentions have content.

Bourdieu's notion of the field is akin to many philosophies that have attempted to reinvigorate individualistic conceptions of action with notions of "the social," widely including American pragmatists such as Mead and Dewey, critical theorists such as Habermas, and, of course, existential phenomenologists like Heidegger. A good interpretation of Bourdieu's goal is to fill out more abstract philosophical conceptions of sociality with specific sociological content.<sup>42</sup> In characteristically strident fashion, he writes, "to proclaim 'I am a bourgeois intellectual, I am a slimy rat!' as Sartre liked to do, is devoid of implications. But to say 'I am an assistant professor at Grenoble and I am speaking to a Parisian professor' is to force oneself to ask whether it is not the relation between these two positions that is speaking through my mouth." (1992, 194) Bourdieu's identification of the conditionings, dispositions, practices, properties etc embodied in *habitus* is a way of tracing collective social history as it is embodied in categories of thought and schemas of perception. (2000, 9) "Every field," Bourdieu writes, "is the institutionalization of a point of view in things and in habitus." (2000, 99) It is, lastly, a "regime of rationality" objectified and manifested in a particular structure of social exchange. (2000, 113)

The "field effect" accounts for what Bourdieu calls an "alchemical" transformation from social conditions to *habitus*, alchemical because the change of social space into mental and corporeal schemata is not a matter of direct reduction of the latter to the former. (1988, 3) Such is the mistake of theories of ideology, Bourdieu argues (and, by extension, objectivism and strongly sociological explanations of social action). They assert, implicitly or explicitly, that there is a mechanical relationship between a social or political environment and a set of beliefs or values.

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<sup>42</sup> Shusterman, for example, writes, "though Dewey was right to insist that our concept of art is largely shaped by historical and socio-economic factors, Bourdieu's work (with its more fine-grained analysis of class and class fragments, economic and social capital) makes clear that the relations between wealth and social class and between economic and cultural capital are far more complex than Dewey accounts for." (1999, 21)

Beliefs, desires, dispositions, etc, on this view, are reducible to their social context, in other words. Bourdieu's account of the interaction of field and *habitus* is meant to explain the generative relationship between social fields and individual dispositions where accounts of social action like theories of ideology seem to assert that there is a mechanical production of the latter by the former. Bourdieu's book *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* intends to make just this point. In it, he argues that Heidegger's philosophy can neither be understood as free from the social and political conditions of his time, nor as determined by them mechanically, as an *Ideologiekritik* might suggest. The social and political character of Heidegger's philosophy must be explained, instead, in terms of the alchemical inculcation into the *habitus* of the professional philosopher of the specific stakes which structured the social fields of which Heidegger was a member.

It is crucial for Bourdieu that his concept of the field is clearly distinct from the mechanically causal models of action I described as collectivist and "strongly sociological" in Chapter Two. The classificatory system, Bourdieu writes, is "the generator of practices adjusted to the regularities inherent in a condition . . . *without any mechanical determination*, it generates the set of 'choices' constituting life-styles, which derive their meaning, i.e. their value, from their position in a system of oppositions and correlations." (2007, 175, emphasis added) Bourdieu's claim is that his conception of the interaction of fields and *habitus* is neither objectivist nor collectivist<sup>43</sup> because it operates "through" one's embodied practical sense. This is what he means when he says, for example, "one can say that gymnastics is geometry so long as this is not taken to mean that the gymnast is a geometer." (1990, *Logic*, 93)

But does this claim dispel the reasonable concern that all of Bourdieu's talk about the social construction of perception, appreciation and action is really just objectivism in disguise? Ultimately, this question is simply one way of asking if Bourdieu's theory of practical sense can

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<sup>43</sup> Nor functionalist, as Elster claims; more on Elster's critique soon.

help to explain the microprocesses of social action. I believe it can, but we must investigate his conception of the field in more depth in order to understand how.

### Champ1 *and* Champ2

Bourdieu's account of social fields does in fact bear a strong similarity to the objectivist theories he rejects, as his frequent use of market-oriented metaphors makes clear. Bourdieu argues, for example, that "practices never cease to comply with an economic logic." (1990, *Logic*, 122) Relatedly, Wacquant suggests that Bourdieu's model intentionally grants an analytic priority to objectivism. (1992, 11) Bourdieu's intention to lay out "the real logic of action" in the service of a "truly scientific knowledge of practice and of the practical mode of knowledge" also suggests as much. (1990, *Logic*, 27 and 57) This seeming concession to mechanical models of social fields is embodied most clearly in Bourdieu's account of social capital, which can be defined as capital with a cognitive foundation.<sup>44</sup> (Earle, 1999, 183) Examples of social capital are credentials, titles, bearing, voice, linguistic competence, erudition, grace, *savoir faire* – "in short," Bennett Berger writes, "all the skills and facilities that function as assets (and liabilities in some contexts) in the cultural performances of everyday life." (1995, 93) Bourdieu is vague on the meaning of capital, defining it simply as that which is efficacious in a given field. (1992, 98) Does this vagueness suggest that the meaning of all social fields is determined by their distribution of economic and social capital? If true, does this mean that Bourdieu's model for explaining social action ultimately slides into a mechanical or objectivist account, despite his intentions otherwise?

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<sup>44</sup> Though one could argue that all forms of capital have a cognitive foundation, Bourdieu's point is that the *primary* characteristic of social capital is its symbolic function. Thus, while money itself is not symbolic capital, a platinum American Express card is. The latter serves to distinguish its holder – through knowledge and recognition – from those who occupy subordinate positions in the social field. (Earle, 1999, 183)

More specifically, one may be concerned that Bourdieu's conception of the field is parasitic on a metaphysical claim about the "real truth" of social life, understood as a market. It is unclear, in other words, if the "oppositions" and "correlations" which structure social fields through what Bourdieu calls "positions of mutual exclusion" are meant to represent intrinsic features of the social world itself (or, we might say, intrinsic features of any social world). I will offer what I believe to be a satisfactory response to this concern in terms of a response to Dreyfus and Rabinow, who articulate the worry most clearly. I raise this concern now for two central reasons: first, it is important for the coherence of Bourdieu's theory that it be clearly distinguished from objectivist or collectivist accounts of social action; second, inasmuch as Dreyfus and Rabinow conclude on the basis of their critique that Bourdieu ought to abandon his scientific pretensions and focus instead on *interpreting* social behavior, the outcome of this dispute bears upon the question of whether Bourdieu's theory of practical sense is intended to be or is capable of being *explanatory*. These questions are related because Bourdieu takes himself to be engaged in the project of objective explanatory social science. My general goal here is to show that this claim is defensible when understood in the right way, and that as a result Bourdieu's theory of practical sense is capable of giving an explanatory account of social action where other models, as I argued in Chapter Two, have failed.

Dreyfus and Rabinow argue that we must distinguish two components of Bourdieu's model, both seemingly internal to the concept of a social field. First, Bourdieu lays out what they call an empirical program of "existential analytics," a research program dedicated to detailing the organization of social fields and their incorporation into the *habitus*. Dreyfus and Rabinow support this program, arguing that it is the appropriate way to study how human beings act and how their practices cohere. They would support Bourdieu, for example, when he writes, "praxeology is a universal anthropology which takes into account the historicity, and thus the relativity, of cognitive structures, while recording the fact that agents *universally* put to work such historical structures." (1992, 139)

Dreyfus and Rabinow object, however, to Bourdieu's theory of social capital, which they understand as a metaphysical theory of social meaning itself. (1999, 85) Contra Bourdieu, they argue that the study of social action ought to be interpretive. Richard Shusterman and Bohman make much the same critique. (Shusterman, 1999, 91 and Bohman, 1999, 135) In general, the argument is that Bourdieu makes unwarranted assertions about the meaning of social practices, namely, that they are reducible to an economic logic. To avoid doing so, these critics argue, Bourdieu ought to abandon the attempt to explain objective social structures in terms of social capital and turn instead to the task of interpreting social practices. "Without arguments to the contrary," Dreyfus and Rabinow write, "it would seem that one has no right to conclude from the universal *ontological structure* of human being that the many ways that this structure gets filled out in everyday life of societies covers up a specific truth, universal or otherwise, about the *meaning* of human being." (1999, 85)

I will respond to Dreyfus and Rabinow's critique by distinguishing two senses in which Bourdieu speaks of social fields. Following William Earle, I will call them *Champ 1* ("field 1") and *Champ 2* ("field 2").<sup>45</sup> The distinction between *Champ 1* and *Champ 2* warrants an account of objective social structure which ought to be acceptable to Dreyfus and Rabinow, I will argue. Capable of resisting the injunction to "go fully interpretive," then, we are free to put Bourdieu's model of intelligent action head to head with other ostensibly explanatory accounts of social action.

*Champ 1* refers to what Earle calls "global social space." It is structured by two principles of differentiation: economic capital and social capital. (1999, 177) It is reasonable to consider *Champ 1* as an alternative to Marx's account of the economic forces of production of society. But this may be a misleading analogy, because *Champ 1* is not meant to be an account of the "motor"

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<sup>45</sup> Bourdieu would likely respond to Dreyfus and Rabinow in terms of his theory of "self-reflexive sociology," which he believes warrants an objective account of social life following the model of the natural sciences. I will have more to say about self-reflexivity in Chapter Five. Here, though, I think a richer response comes from the relationship between *Champ 1* and *Champ 2* implicit in Bourdieu's account.

of history. If the analogy to Marx's account of the forces of production were completely accurate, Bourdieu's account of social fields would be susceptible to Dreyfus and Rabinow's charge.<sup>46</sup> It is not, however. While Bourdieu *is* making a claim about the universal structure of social fields, he is *not* making a claim about the universal meaning of that structure.<sup>47</sup> *Champ1* expresses the kind of universal claim Bourdieu is making.

*Champ1* expresses the intuition that the fundamental structuring force of society is "difference." "Social identity," Bourdieu writes, "is defined and asserted through difference." (2007, 172) This is not an assertion about meaning as such, nor is it a Derridean claim about the nature of language. Instead, Bourdieu is suggesting the perhaps self-evident idea that the social world is ordered, and that it is ordered through patterns of differences. These patterns of difference mark the positions in social space occupied by social actors. The social world, in other words, has "kinks," which give form and significance to the spaces occupied by social actors. The boundaries and definitions (in the sense that a shape or a body "has definition") of social fields mark these kinks. When Bourdieu argues that social space is defined by positions of mutual exclusion (or "distinction"), this is the intuition I believe he is after. Capital, in his sense, is nothing more in principle than the organizing forces commonly recognized by social agents according to which social positions are distributed. This is why Bourdieu explicitly identifies as a misreading of his position the view that all human behavior is a *quest* for distinction (2000, 134); "there is a production *of* difference," he writes, "which is in no way the product of a *search for* difference." (1992, 100)

Bourdieu's word for the "law" which structures social fields is the Greek "*nomos*." Bourdieu's assessment of the etymology of this word helps to illustrate my interpretation of

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<sup>46</sup> Of course, this claim depends upon a certain interpretation of Marx, particularly of his later, more "scientific," work.

<sup>47</sup> Bourdieu's account of social structure is, therefore, metaphysical, in the sense that it is meant to apply universally to social life as such. Dreyfus and Rabinow use the term "metaphysical" as a synonym for a putatively neutral account of the meaning of all social practices, however. In this sense of the term, Bourdieu's account is not metaphysical, as my interpretation of *Champ1* is meant to show.

*Champ1*. In an essay examining legal practice as a social field (which he calls the “juridical field”), Bourdieu remarks in a footnote that the word “*nomos*,” which means “law” or “custom,” is derived from the Greek word “*nemo*,” meaning “to separate,” “divide,” or “distribute.” (1986, 837) *Champ1* is the expression of this etymological connection. It is the fact that a law or custom, in the most general sense of a structuring force of social action, requires perceptible differences and divisions in the social world.

True, Bourdieu frequently speaks the language of markets, capital and currency. But to say that all human social practices operate according to a currency is not the same thing as saying that currency is the operative notion behind all human social practices. Earlier I quoted Bourdieu saying, “practices never cease to comply with an economic logic.” (1990, *Logic*, 122) This quote seems to underscore Dreyfus and Rabinow’s critique. The proper way to interpret Bourdieu’s point, however, is by analogy to what he means by the principle of difference. “Economic logic,” for Bourdieu, is not *the* principle of social organization; it is the principle *that* social fields *are* organized. “The theory of strictly economic practices,” he writes, “is a particular case of the general theory of the economy of practices.” (1990, *Logic*, 122) And again: “*Practices form an economy*, that is, follow an immanent reason that cannot be restricted to economic reason, for the economy of practices may be defined by reference to a wide range of functions and ends.” (1992, 119)

*Champ1* is not therefore an account of the universal meaning of social life. It is, rather, an account of the abstract and universal conditions of possibility of there being social fields. *Champ1* represents a quasi-ontological claim in Bourdieu’s account of social fields. It is the argument that social fields require *some* principle of organization, and that that principle of organization carves up social space into positions of mutual exclusion. The phrase, “the actual logic of practice,” Bourdieu writes, is “oxymoronic since the hallmark of practice is to be ‘logical,’ to have a logic without having logic as its principle.” (1992, 120)



On this reading, then, *Champ2* is an account of the contingent practices that sustain, perpetuate and give content, *and meaning*, to social fields as such. When Bourdieu speaks of the “autonomy” of different social fields, he refers to the internal schemata of values (forms of capital) which comprise the “stakes” of that field. These specific stakes refer to *Champ2*. By calling individual social fields autonomous, Bourdieu suggests that no one social field can be understood simply as a reflection of another, or of one underlying social field. A social field does not truly exist for Bourdieu until it is autonomous. *Champ2*, therefore, understood as the highly differentiated social worlds within global social space (Earle, 1999, 178), is a necessary feature of any social field.

In banal ways – applying for a job, for example – *Champ2* materializes in *habitus* as signs of competence (dress, bearing, manners, etc). (2000, 100) The worlds of sport, art, politics, academia – the local social fields studied by sociology – are systems of difference structure upon these currencies of competence. *Champ1* is simply the principle of differentiation itself, a principle for which Bourdieu believes markets and capital are a fair metaphor. In his political analysis of Heidegger, for example, Bourdieu exemplifies the way in which *Champ1* and *Champ2* interact, considering both the local social field of which Heidegger was a member (principally, German academic philosophy) and the ways in which this field was situated in terms of social and economic capital in broader social space. (1988, 42) Against a charge like Dreyfus and Rabinow’s, then, Bourdieu writes (with my additions):

Nothing permits us to suppose that the principle of differentiation [*Champ2*] is the same at all times and in all places, in Ming China and contemporary China, or again, in the Germany, Russia, or Algeria, of today. But with the exception of the least differentiated societies (which nevertheless reveal differences, less easy to measure, in symbolic capital), all societies reveal themselves as social spaces, that is, structures of differences [*Champ1*] which cannot really be comprehended without constructing the generative principle on which such differences are objectively based. The principle is nothing other than the structure [*Champ1*] of the forms of power and types of capital which are efficacious in the social universe considered [*Champ2*] – and which vary according to places and moments. (quoted by Earle, 1999, 179)

The task of sociology, then, Bourdieu argues, is to trace across seemingly disparate instances of *Champ2* homologous principles of differentiation (*Champ1*). Each specific field is defined by what Bourdieu calls the “*nomos*,” or constitution of a field (alternately: its *doxa* or “epistemic unconscious”). Of the academic philosophical field, for instance, Bourdieu writes, “communication between philosophical minds can thus arise from the communion of their social unconscious.” (1988, 97) Different social fields have homologous *doxa* because they share positions in global social space (*Champ1*). These positions in global social space are defined and differentiated with respect to economic and social capital, which are the symbolic means of organizing social space. The *habitus* is a generative entity, we ought to remember, because it is capable of producing the “correct” behavior, disposition, taste, etc homologously across diverse social fields. The relationship of *Champ1* and *Champ2* helps to clarify this claim. The *habitus* is capable of transposing the practical understanding given to some position with respect to *Champ1* across diverse instances of *Champ2*. One can transpose a sense of his or her place in the social order, in other words, across particular social fields.

In both the philosophical field and the aesthetic field, for example, Bourdieu shows that the important thing is “to know without ever having learnt.” Similarly, one can study across fields the homologous attitudes of “distance from necessity” which distinguish those marked by privilege within a field from those who do not know how to play the game of culture as a game. (2007, 330) Bourdieu studies these homologies across all manner of banal social fields, including marriage practices, dress, and choices in food.<sup>48</sup> Thus one purpose of studying local social fields

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<sup>48</sup> For instance, in characteristically dense but rich language, Bourdieu writes: “Given the basic opposition between form and substance, one could re-generate each of the oppositions between the two antagonistic approaches to the treatment of food and the act of eating. In one case, food is claimed as a material reality, a nourishing substance which sustains the body and give strength (hence the emphasis on heavy, fatty, strong foods, of which the paradigm is pork – fatty and salty – the antithesis of fish – light, lean and bland); in the other, the priority given to form (the shape of the body, for example) and social form, formality, puts the pursuit of strength and substance in the background and identifies true freedom with the elective asceticism of a self-imposed rule. And it could be shown that two antagonistic world views, two worlds, two representations of human excellence are contained in this matrix. Substance – or matter – is what is substantial, not only ‘filling’ but also real, as opposed to all appearances, all the fine words and empty gestures that ‘butter no parsnips’ and are, as the phrase goes, purely symbolic; reality, as against sham,

is to uncover the shared principles of order operating across social space. To this end, Wacquant cites Bourdieu's definition of his own task: "“sociology is the art of thinking phenomenally different things as similar in their structure and functioning and of transferring that which has been established about a constructed object, say the religious field, to a whole series of new objects, the artistic or political field and so on.”" (1992, 5)

The relationship between *Champ1* and *Champ2* helps to show how an account of social action like Bourdieu's is coherent and internally consistent. It also offers a depiction of the objective conditions constituting social space and does so without falling prey to an unargued depiction of the universal nature of social meaning. It makes a quasi-ontological claim of the sort Dreyfus and Rabinow support, namely, about the universal conditions of possibility of social fields. This condition of possibility is the requirement that social fields have a principle of order, and that this principle of order be in some sense recognizable by social actors. The existence of economic and social capital fulfills this second requirement, that a principle of order be recognizable. The result is a principle of order manifested in positions of mutual social distinction.

On this ground, Bourdieu believes that social fields can be studied objectively. By this, he means that social fields, and the generative *habitus* produced by them, can be explained, and not merely interpreted. That is, Bourdieu means to give causal explanations of in-the-world objective social structures. This is possible because the objective social and economic conditions which create homologous organizations of *Champ2* are recursive, according to Bourdieu. They are sustained by nothing more than the materialization of a common history of those social

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imitation, window-dressing; the little eating-house with its marble-topped tables and paper napkins where you get an honest square meal and aren't 'paying for the wallpaper' as in the fancy restaurants; being, as against seeming, nature and the natural, simplicity (pot-luck, 'take it as it comes,' 'no standing on ceremony'), as against embarrassment, mincing and posturing, airs and graces, which are always suspected of being a substitute for substance, i.e., for sincerity, for feeling, for what is felt and proved in actions; it is the free-speech and language of the heart which makes the true 'nice guy,' blunt, straightforward, unbending, honest, genuine, 'straight down the line' and 'straight as a die,' as opposed to everything that is pure form, done only for form's sake; it is freedom and the refusal of complications, as opposed to respect for all the forms and formalities spontaneously perceived as instruments of distinction and power. On these moralities, these world views, there is no neutral viewpoint . . ." (2007, 198-9)

practices.<sup>49</sup> I would like now to put forward an interpretation of the meaning of objectivity in Bourdieu's account of social fields. The principle of social recursivity gives Bourdieu the capacity to talk about social forces without positing the existence of mysterious causal forces operating over and above the heads of human beings. It is an account which allows Bourdieu to explain, and not only interpret, social fields, and to do so without running afoul of my argument that he puts forward no claim about the universal meaning of social life.

To say that social structures are recursive means that those structures are created and recreated by the resources – namely, the individuals, through their social activities – which constitute them. (Giddens, 1986, xxiii) Objective structures exist, on Bourdieu's model, but only insofar as they are realized in and are the product of their interiorization in *habitus*. (Pinto, 1999, 96) This is why Bourdieu calls fields a “structuring structure” and a “structured structure.”<sup>50</sup> Fields evolve as individuals modify the actions which constitute those fields. Children invest their energy in education, for example, Bourdieu argues, relative to the degree to which they depend on the field of education to reproduce their form of capital; should they cease doing so, the field itself will change or even vanish. (2000, 216) Interestingly, Dreyfus and Rabinow put the principle of recursiveness as clearly as anyone else: “human beings are socialized into this system of dispositions that enables them to produce on the appropriate occasion skillful social activity that embodies, sustains, and reproduces the social field that in turn governs this very activity.” (1999, 86)

Douglas Porpora's example of the development of objective structure in a chess game helps to elucidate Bourdieu's view of objective recursive social structures. In arguing for what he

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<sup>49</sup> I would argue, then, that Bourdieu is a social constructionist. He would very likely reject the language of social constructionism, however, arguing that it is parasitic upon the objectivist and intellectualist frameworks of social explanation which he goes to great lengths to reject.

<sup>50</sup> “The *habitus* is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes.” (2007, 170) *Nota bene*: Elster is therefore right that *habitus* purports to explain social action twice, but wrong that one side of this explanation is a “quasi-intentional strategy” and that the other is a “demonic plan.” One side is the capacity to produce classifiable practices (i.e. field) and the other is the capacity to appreciate and embody those classifications (i.e. *habitus*)

calls “emergently material social relations,” Porpora makes the commonly recognized point that a game of chess is a product of the constitutive rules that regulate the actions of the players.<sup>51</sup> But once a game has begun, he points out, objective relations become established on the board as pieces begin to occupy strategic positions. (Sawyer, 2005, 85) A game in different stages of development is virtually a different game. Emergently material social relations are those relations that exist independently of the ways situated actors think and act. (Porpora, 1993, 213) Porpora’s depiction of the constitutive structures of social practices function in the place of what Bourdieu calls the field. They elucidate the emergence (in the non-technical sense) of objective social relations from contingent practices, much in the way that *Champ2* “fills out” and makes material the principle of differentiation represented by *Champ1*.

Dreyfus and Rabinow are wrong, then, to think that Bourdieu’s account of social capital is an unargued claim about the objective meaning of social life itself. Instead, *Champ1* clarifies their model of a program of empirical existential analytics. The assumption that markets are the most appropriate metaphor for the principle of differentiation inherent to social space can, as Dreyfus and Rabinow imply it must, be given more historical and genealogical nuance than Bourdieu wants, but this is no threat to the model itself. *Champ1* expresses the fact that social fields have ordered social relations, which, historically and recursively, have created innumerable local social worlds (*Champ2*).<sup>52</sup> Bourdieu’s claim about the objectivity of social structure has more in common with Wittgenstein’s claim that social practices require “friction” in order to be explained than it does with Marx’s account of the meaning of social life. It is reminiscent of the lesson of Kant’s metaphysical dove, which believes that its flight would be easier in empty space.

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<sup>51</sup> Though there is much made in the literature of the difference between constitutive and regulatory rules, I am inclined to think that they are more similar than they are different. Most regulatory rules are also constitutive of practices (e.g. “stop at the red light” is plausibly more than a regulation of ways to drive a car; traffic lights constitute particular driving practices) and it is hard to imagine examples of constitutive rules that do not also regulate behavior.

<sup>52</sup> Bourdieu suggests that his principle goal is to “think relationally” (1992, 96); Wacquant writes, “. . . *habitus and field designate bundles of relations.*” (1992, 16)

The key point is that objective social structure in this sense helps to explain intelligent social action. Bourdieu's sociological investigations into distinct social fields are meant to explain how the social and historical conditions of those fields generate individual perceptions, tastes and actions. It relies upon an account of objective social structure in the sense that Bourdieu is attempting to explain facts about the social world. This project is quite distinct from giving an account of the meaning of social life as such. True, Bourdieu is far more comfortable than Dreyfus and Rabinow associating sociology with the methodology of the natural sciences when criticizing hermeneutic philosophy. Bourdieu sometimes sounds more like the analytically minded foes of the so-called *Geisteswissenschaften* such as Elster and Føllesdal than he does a continental theorist in the tradition of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.<sup>53</sup> Bourdieu himself defends his assertion that sociology is a rigorous science through an account of what he calls "self-reflexive sociology." I will have more to say about the idea of self-reflexivity in Chapter Five. Here, though, my interest is not in the degree to which Bourdieu's explanations of social action mirror the epistemic status of assertions made by the natural sciences. My only claim is that Bourdieu's account is meant to be explanatory. This claim is derived from his understanding of objective social structure and is independent of its relationship to the hypothetico-deductive model of natural science explanations. It is not therefore guilty of Dreyfus and Rabinow's charge. The question now is *how* Bourdieu's account is explanatory. To answer this, I must turn briefly to Merleau-Ponty's account of perception.

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<sup>53</sup> For example: ". . . the human sciences," Bourdieu writes, "are subject to the same rules that apply to all sciences. You have to produce coherent explanatory systems of variables, propositions assembled into parsimonious models that account for a large number of empirically observable facts and which can be opposed only by other, more powerful models which have to obey the same conditions of logical coherence, systematicity, and empirical falsifiability." (1992, 185)

*Merleau-Ponty and Motor Intentionality*

Bourdieu's understanding of the body is largely derived from Merleau-Ponty's account of the "intentional arc" of embodied consciousness, which shows how perceiving bodies are attuned to a world which solicits their actions and perceptions. This account of perception demonstrates that embodied intentional states are both *practical* and *normative*. Both of these points are in turn key concepts in Bourdieu's account of social action.

Merleau-Ponty views the body as intentional in the phenomenological sense that our embodied compartments are directed toward the world. Our bodily skills are "about" things, namely, the tasks it must accomplish. This is not intentionality in the sense I have been using the term, that is, as a way of referring to psychological, mental, representational, or propositionally or conceptually articulated states. Merleau-Ponty describes a more basic form of intentionality than these usual senses denote. What he calls "motor intentionality" expresses the idea that individuals have a "preobjective" contact with the world through the medium of their bodies. (Although even this might be too quick, for Merleau-Ponty also wants to show that *I am* my body.) The essence of this contact is practical and normative.

In the section of *Phenomenology of Perception* entitled "The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motility," Merleau-Ponty contests the claim that perception is a matter of describing or mirroring the external world in mental states, arguing instead that embodied perception anchors us in a world of largely practical tasks.<sup>54</sup> Perception is our body's way of laying down practical coordinates for our activities in the world. Merleau-Ponty writes, "the word 'here' applied to my

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<sup>54</sup> This claim by Merleau-Ponty is gaining traction in contemporary cognitive science. Francisco Varela, for example, argues for a "cognition as enaction" model, one which replaces the representational view of cognition with an account of perception as derived from practical perceptual tasks. Varela writes, "according to the dominant computationalist tradition, the point of departure for understanding perception is typically abstract: the information-processing problem of recovering pre-given properties of the world. According to the enactive approach, however, the point of departure for understanding perception is the study of how the perceiver guides his actions in local situations." (1999, 12) Varela's model is meant to show that the experiential structures of cognition motivate conceptual understanding and rational thought. (1999, 16) This view is very Merleau-Pontian.

body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external coordinates, but the laying down of the first co-ordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, the situation of the body in face of its tasks.” (1962, 115) Our perceiving bodies “lead” us into the world, so to speak, behind which our awareness only trails: “if I stand in front of my desk and lean on it with both hands, only my hands are stressed and the whole of my body trails behind them like the tail of a comet.” (1962, 115) Merleau-Ponty’s point is that our bodies themselves are our intentional anchors in the world; they enable us to be involved in a situation. Put bluntly, they enable us to be *here*, with all that that entails.

The relationship between one’s body and the world is normative on Merleau-Ponty’s view because the situations we are in lead or solicit our perceptions toward the “right” way to see, hear, smell, taste, or touch something. Merleau-Ponty calls our ability to understand the right way to perceive a given object or situation *sens*, which means both “sense,” as in perception, and “orientation,” as in a sense of *how* to taste, touch, smell, see, or hear things. Merleau-Ponty argues that our bodies are constantly at work attempting to get the “best grip” (*prise*) of the world in whatever particular way the situation demands. This is to say, in other words, that perception is fundamentally normative, or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, that perception “fluctuates round a norm.” He illustrates this concept with examples from ordinary life. For example, Merleau-Ponty writes, “for each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself.” (1962, 352) Sean Kelly offers a helpful explanation of this model of perception:

Suppose you are looking at an object that is uniformly colored but unevenly lit. Perhaps it is a tabletop with a natural pattern of shadows across its surface. If asked to determine the color of the table, your eyes move automatically to the part on its surface where the lighting is best. Which part of the surface this is depends at least in part on the color being lit. Darker colors are seen better in brighter light, whereas brighter colors are seen better in dimmer light. What you as a perceiver seem to know immediately is where to move your eyes to see the color best. (2002, 84)



Perception can be practical and normative because our bodies act as intentional “threads” connecting each of us to the social world. At bottom, Merleau-Ponty shows that practical sense is intentional (in the non-standard usage) because it links individuals to the world, but it does so without presuming that individuals must somehow transcend an inner world of mental representations in order to make contact with that which is outside of it (e.g. other minds or things-in-themselves). This account of how “the world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself” is Merleau-Ponty’s essential contribution to an account of intelligent practical action. (1962, 474) In sum, Merleau-Ponty can be understood as literally “fleshing out” Heidegger’s concept of *Das Man* by showing how our bodies are the sense organs, so to speak, attuned to the social world and to its schemas of action and understanding.

Merleau-Ponty builds this argument out of a two-pronged critique of “empiricist” and “intellectualist” explanations of perception, both of which bear a strong similarity to Bourdieu’s critique of objectivist and intellectualist explanations of social action. While intellectualism associates perception with acts of judgment in ways reminiscent of the explanation of action in terms of transparent mental content, empiricism associates perception with its sensory causal antecedents much like strongly sociological explanations do with the ostensibly non-mental causes of action. Both Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu use these critiques to structure their accounts of embodied practical sense. I will briefly outline Merleau-Ponty’s arguments against intellectualism and empiricism, largely because they add grist to the mill for arguing against failed accounts of social action that follow from the schema of reasons and causes. And this schema is, as I have stressed, the one that an account of practical sense is meant to repair.

To say that perception is normative means that perceptual stimuli do not operate upon perceivers according to the standard causal model. According to the tradition Merleau-Ponty labels “empiricist,” perception is explained by the mechanically causal relationship between entities in the world and the stimuli they produce on our perceptual organs. Empiricist accounts of sensation fail because they take mere sensations – which are derived conceptually from the

tradition of “primary qualities” – as fully determinate in and of themselves. Such accounts fail to recognize that individual stimuli are always “charged with a meaning” which is derived from the larger perceptual context. An individual note in a sonata, for example, is never heard “purely,” but only within the context of the whole sonata. “The perceptual ‘something,’” Merleau-Ponty writes, “is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a ‘field.’” (1962, 4)

Explanations of shape and color constancy are notably obscure on empiricist lights, for a causal model of sensations can make no sense of the fact that a tree seen at 10 feet and at 100 feet are seen as the same size despite projecting quite differently sized images on one’s retina. Merleau-Ponty shows, by contrast, that we perceive the same object at varying distances or the same color under different lighting conditions because those objects of perception are never isolated, but are rather saturated with meaning (i.e. a norm). “Empiricism,” he writes, “is not concerned with what we see, but with what we ought to see, according to the retinal image.” (1962, 36) This is entirely the wrong sort of “ought.” At bottom, then, Merleau-Ponty’s argument against empiricist models of perception is a claim against brutally causal models of the relationship between agents and the world. As such, it is of a piece with Bourdieu’s sociology and the broader arguments I am making about explanation as such.

Intellectualism – which forms the heart of Cartesian and Kantian theories of perception<sup>55</sup> – recognizes the failures of empiricism and attempts to remedy them with the concept of judgment. “In intellectualism,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “judgment is everywhere where pure sensation is not – that is, absolutely everywhere.” (1962, 39) Where empiricism fails because it depicts perception as a matter of passively recording sensory stimuli, intellectualism fails because it identifies perception with the active mental construction of the perceived world. Intellectualism imagines perception to be something like a flashlight that illuminates the objects given to our attention. “But in order to relate it to the life of consciousness,” Merleau-Ponty argues, “one

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<sup>55</sup> On Merleau-Ponty’s lights, Cartesian and Kantian theories of perception are both representative of intellectualism. This is, of course, a contestable claim.

would have to show how a perception awakens attention.” (1962, 32) What intellectualism obscures is the way that perceptual experiences are *already* infused with a meaning prior to our psychological organization of perceptual data. Merleau-Ponty’s goal is to distinguish perception from attention and judgment, following the distinction that he believes is endemic to common sense.<sup>56</sup> Often, he constructs this claim through analyses of perceptually impaired subjects or instances of perceptual illusion, which by contrast shed light on the normal phenomena. For example, Merleau-Ponty writes:

Now if we see what we judge, how can we distinguish between true and false perception? How will it then be possible to say that the sufferer from hallucinations or the madman ‘think they see what they do not see?’ Where will be the difference between ‘seeing’ and ‘thinking one sees?’ If the reply is made that the sane man judges only by adequate signs and completely coherent material, it is, then, because there is a difference between motivated judgment of veridical perception and the empty judgment of false perception. And as the difference is not in the form of the judgment but in the sensible text to which it gives form, to perceive in the full sense of the word (as the antithesis of imagining) is not to judge, it is to apprehend an immanent sense in the sensible before judgment begins. The phenomenon of true perception offers, therefore, a meaning inherent in the signs, and of which judgment is merely the optional expression. (1962, 40)

The crucial difference between judgment and perception is that the former cannot account for “contingency in the occasions of thought.” (1962, 32) Such contingencies – marked by the difference between seeing and thinking one sees, for example – suggest that intellectualism cannot make sense of ordinary perception. Wrathall summarizes Merleau-Ponty’s critique clearly:

What the phenomenology of lived experience teaches us, Merleau-Ponty believes, is that our primary way of being in the world is a bodily existence that, for its part, is experienced neither as a mental mode of comportment, with determinate conceptual contents, nor as a merely physical interaction with physical objects. In fact, the phenomenology of lived bodily experience shows that thoughts – ‘mental’ states and

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<sup>56</sup> “Ordinary experience draws a clear distinction between sense experience and judgment. It sees judgment as the taking of a stand, as an effort to know something which shall be valid for myself every moment of my life, and equally for other actual or potential minds; sense experience, on the contrary, is taking appearance at its face value, without trying to possess it or learn its truth.” (1962, 39)

events – and ‘physical’ objects themselves actually bear on the body in ways that are meaningful but not rational. (2005, 115)

In much the same way that Bourdieu retains important elements of objectivism and subjectivism in his own account of the logic of practical sense, Merleau-Ponty agrees with the intellectualist that perception is indeed organized. It is a mistake, however, to think that this organization is due to the activity of thinking. Like the empiricist, Merleau-Ponty believes that there is an immanent meaning in the perceived world, but the model of brute causal sensations cannot account for how this organization is taken into experience. Nor will it do to say that the world itself is somehow conceptually articulated.<sup>57</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of embodied perception stakes out a new position with regard to these dominant traditions, a position on which Bourdieu founds his explanatory model of practical sense.

#### *Embodied Motivated Behavior and the Microprocesses of Social Action*

My intention here is to show that the microprocesses of social action can be explained in terms of embodied motivated behavior. Some critics of Bourdieu’s theory of practical sense argue that the *habitus* acts, in Paul DiMaggio’s words, like a theoretical *deus ex machina* by means of which the relationship between the social world and individual action is explained. (1979, 1464) I intend to show in this section that Bourdieu’s account of social action relies upon an account of embodied behavior which is no theoretical *deus ex machina*. My interpretation of

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<sup>57</sup> An interesting way to understand Merleau-Ponty’s account of the world “soliciting” perception is by contrast to a view like McDowell’s. McDowell, like Merleau-Ponty, argues that perception is fundamentally “open” to the world. At issue, though, is the nature of such “openness.” If we are to assume that the causal structures of the world justify our intentional content, grounded in perception, then we must conclude, McDowell claims, that the world itself is conceptually articulated. Merleau-Ponty can be understood as saying that the world is indeed articulated, but nonconceptually, through solicitations to the body itself. For an account of Merleau-Ponty as an alternative to McDowell, see Mark Wrathall, “Motives, Reasons, and Causes” in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, Eds. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pg. 125.

Bourdieu builds upon Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment. I shall structure this argument as a rebuttal of Elster's critique of Bourdieu, a critique which elaborates on DiMaggio's sentiment and which Elster takes to be key evidence in favor of the explanatory superiority of methodological individualism in social science.

Elster associates Bourdieu with what he calls the "intellectual fallacy of by-products," the idea of which is that if extant social states are not the result of intentional action, they must then be produced by some overarching, teleological and often demonic plan. The fallacy fails to notice that some social states can be present without being the result of action designed to bring them about, Elster argues. (1985, 43) Elster believes that Bourdieu falls prey to this fallacy on account of his purported inability to identify mechanisms of social reproduction. Focused on *Distinction*, Elster argues that Bourdieu gives two kinds of explanation of the concept of distinction, each of which is unsatisfying: first, as a quasi-intentional strategy of social behavior, and second, as the macro-social result of actions dominated by fields of power. Of the first kind of explanation, Elster argues that Bourdieu fails to give an account of what it means to adopt a non-conscious strategy; Bourdieu fails to distinguish between behavior that accidentally serves an agent's interests and behavior that can be explained by the fact that it does so. Of the second, Bourdieu unhappily views social life as a "diabolical plan to which there corresponds no devilish planner." (1985, 104-106) Like Foucault (on Elster's interpretation), Bourdieu then sees "every minute detail of social action as part of a vast design for oppression." (1982, 455) I shall respond to these criticisms in turn, showing that Bourdieu's response to the first invalidates the second. I shall attempt to show that this response signifies an improvement in accounts of intelligent action.

Elster surely overstates the case when he complains that Bourdieu does not *care* about identifying the mechanisms or microprocesses that relate the actions of individuals to social properties.<sup>58</sup> "The task of sociology," Wacquant quotes Bourdieu saying, is "to uncover the most profound buried structures of the various social worlds which constitute the social universe,

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<sup>58</sup> For an explanation of why I prefer the term "microprocesses" to "mechanism," see Chapter 1.

as well as the ‘mechanisms’ which tend to ensure their reproduction or their transformation.’” (1992, 7) What is really at stake is *how* Bourdieu conceives the causal chains of social properties the identification of which provide for fine-grained explanations, and whether his conception is plausible. Motivated embodied action, or what Bourdieu calls bodily knowledge, does this work. That Bourdieu largely resists the standard Anglo-American terminology of micro-to-macro causal chains and microprocesses is no reason to conclude that his account cannot do the work that these terms suggest must be done.

On Bourdieu’s lights, the body is the locale of *habitus*. (2000, 134) He speaks both of individual bodies and the “social body.” His purpose is not to sketch an image of metaphysical substance dualism, but rather, to show that the body is the site where *habitus* and field mutually interpenetrate. “The body is in the social world but the social world is in the body,” Bourdieu writes. (2000, 152) He draws on the intuition that our bodies are exquisitely perceptive social thermometers and are fundamentally attuned to the pedagogy of culture and society. “We learn bodily,” Bourdieu writes, suggesting that the body acts as a “memory pad” for the normativity of the social world. (2000, 141) This is why Bourdieu focuses on phenomena such as taste, for it is in the visceral and primitive dispositions of the body, acting as the depository of a whole world-view, that one’s sense of social value is most effectively learned. (2007, 218 and 474) The theory of practical sense – entailing the claim that tastes, values, dispositions, etc are not produced by conscious desire and belief formation but are instead presupposed by these higher-level mental activities<sup>59</sup> – turns on this picture of the body as a sponge for social pedagogy. Bourdieu justifies his theoretical framework in-part phenomenologically, with copious references to experiences that require a “feel for the social game.” Such a “feel” is most directly expressible in terms of bodily comportments, such as the bearings, postures, presence, diction, pronunciation, manners, etc, without which a given form of knowledge – say, knowledge of the scholastic field – would be

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<sup>59</sup> Practical sense, Wacquant writes, expresses a “social sensitivity which guides us prior to our positing objects as such”. (1992, 20)

impotent. (2007, 91) Bourdieu also justifies the argument by contrast to failed models of causal and intentional social explanation.

Intelligent action is motivated by the body's capacity to absorb and reproduce social understanding. I mean intelligent here, as usual, in the *phronetic* sense. Bodies understand what and when and how to do a given action. Returning briefly to Merleau-Ponty, consider his account of intelligent bodies at play in a soccer game. What he describes as "lines of force" are a fair metaphor for social norms. He writes:

For the player in action the soccer field is not an 'object,' that is, the ideal term which can give rise to an indefinite multiplicity of perspectival views and remain equivalent under its apparent transformations. It is pervaded with lines of force (the 'yard lines;' those which demarcate the 'penalty area') and is articulated into sectors (for example, the 'openings' between the adversaries) which call for a certain mode of action and which initiate and guide the action as if the player were unaware of it. The field itself is not given to him, but present as the immanent term of his practical intentions; the player becomes one with it and feels the direction of the 'goal' for example, just as immediately as the vertical and the horizontal planes of his own body. It would not be sufficient to say that consciousness inhabits this milieu. At this moment consciousness is nothing other than the dialectic of milieu and action. Each maneuver undertaken by the player modifies the character of the field and establishes new lines of force in which the action in turn unfolds and is accomplished, again altering the phenomenal field. (1963, 168-169)

The view expressed in this example represents the beginning of an explanatory account of intelligent action based in the bodily knowledge of social actors. Merleau-Ponty's point is to show that perception is an intelligent mindless practical skill. What he depicts here is the order intrinsic to a soccer player's feel for the game, including an account of that player's practical sense and an observable outcome like taking a shot toward the goal. Bourdieu's studies function in just the same way, identifying the "lines of force" that organize social fields and the embodied understanding agents have as a result of their living within the milieu of those social fields. His are fine-grained explanations, furthermore, simply the extent to which the lines of force implicit in each social field Bourdieu studies are identified in the production of action.

Social phenomena like racism and sexism exemplify Bourdieu's account of the microprocesses of social action. Where Elster's account of psychic drives simply ignores difficult phenomena such as stereotypes, Bourdieu's model explains phenomena like racism or sexism without assuming that racist or sexist actions originate in individuals with racist or sexist beliefs. Rather than in beliefs or principles held, Bourdieu explains a racist or sexist action in terms of the *habitus* that produced it. This is why he invests concepts like taste with such explanatory importance. The social constitution of taste operates through our bodies, Bourdieu argues. Ugliness, for example, is visceral, like bleach, which itself smells "clean." (2007, 77) Stereotypes operate largely on this level, of our embodied practical sense, which in turn motivates behavior.

In his book *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu investigates the mechanisms of production and reproduction of gender inequality. His tack is predictable. He writes, for example: "... we have embodied the historical structures of the masculine order in the form of unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation." (2001, 5) *Masculine Domination* attests to one way in which individual bodies are socialized, and thus motivated to act in particular ways. He traces the labor of reproduction in this particular social field (and as he would for any social field) through the interaction of specific social structures – families, the church, the education system, etc – and individual bodies. The important point is that this labor of reproduction explains the social actions of individuals in fine-grained ways. This is why Bourdieu calls it labor; his point is to explain the "small steps" of individual and social action which lead to observable social phenomena. For example, of the "apprenticeship" of individuals to socialized and gendered roles, Bourdieu writes:

This apprenticeship is all the more effective because it remains essentially tacit: femininity is imposed for the most part through an unremitting discipline that concerns every part of the body and is continuously recalled through the constraints of clothing or hairstyle. The antagonistic principles of male and female identity are thus laid down in



the form of permanent stances, gaits and postures which are the realization, or rather, the naturalization of an ethic. (2001, 27)

And again:

It is through the training of the body that the most fundamental dispositions are imposed, those which make a person both *inclined and able* to enter into the social games most favorable to the development of manliness – politics, business, science, etc. (2001, 56)

I will have more to say about the importance of embodied understanding being essentially tacit, as Bourdieu suggests, shortly. The point of to make clear here is Bourdieu's intention to explain the production of social action, and to argue for his success in doing so. I do not need to claim that sexist actions are not also produced by persons motivated by explicitly held sexist beliefs, for example. But it is my contention that a wide swatch of sexist actions can be explained better if social theorists study embodied dispositions in the form of tastes, posture, gesture, etc, in other words, all that goes to make up the bodily knowledge of social actors.<sup>60</sup>

To explain the microprocesses of individual action, for Bourdieu, means to lay bare the embodiment of social structures ("schemas") in individuals. What I have called microprocesses, Bourdieu calls the "labor of reproduction" of social action. In place of collective social forces or psychological intentions, the bodily techniques which accomplish this labor of reproduction explain the social actions which they cause. The sort of "feedback mechanism" for which Elster calls is found, furthermore, in the relationship between these bodily techniques and the social world. Why did *x* do *y*? In many cases, *x* did *y* because *x*'s body sensed that *y* was the "right" thing to do. This explanation is not, of course, mechanistic in the way that natural selection is mechanistic in natural science. It is, perhaps, closer to an elaboration, in Cohen's sense, of an explanatory microprocess of social action. By making this comparison, I emphatically do not

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<sup>60</sup> I will argue in Chapter Six that this account of embodiment is also superior in many ways to explanations of embodiment and social action that focus excessively on "body image." This representationalist approach to studying embodiment is prominent amongst those interested in online social practices, and their explanations are limited by it.

mean that Bourdieu's explanatory approach is functional (in Cohen's – or anyone else's – sense). Bourdieu does not explain embodied understanding in terms of its effects. He is deeply interested in those effects, because they recursively structure social institutions and practices, but what explains the action is the causal antecedents embodied in social fields. The point of returning to Cohen is to remind ourselves of the broad class of explanatory devices which, though they fall short of offering nomological and universal mechanisms, nonetheless provide valid causal knowledge of social action. My contention is that Bourdieu offers a convincing account of one such explanatory device.<sup>61</sup>

The key point is that bodily knowledge *generates* individual action. I use the term “generative” in a special sense, to distinguish embodied motivated behavior from merely “competent” social action. Embodied motivated behavior is generative in the sense that it is creative. Creative action is action that transposes norms across homologous social fields and is capable of calling upon the “correct” behavior in new and unique situations. (For example, gendered dispositions are carried across social fields, from dress, to taste in food, to profession, etc.) Bourdieu's model is not unlike Chomsky's account of generative grammar in this sense.<sup>62</sup> *Habitus*, Bourdieu writes, “makes it possible to produce an infinite number of practices that are relatively unpredictable (like the corresponding situations) but also limited in their diversity,” continuing, “[an] infinite capacity for generating products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions – whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production.” (1990, *Logic*, 55) The advantage of Bourdieu's account is that it is meant to show the creativity of social action that is neither freely caused by reasons nor mechanically determined

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<sup>61</sup> Just as Cohen suggests that complete causal knowledge is an explanatory ideal, one could suggest that our understanding of embodied practical sense would be improved with finer-grained knowledge about how bodies absorb social norms. A biological account of the ways that perceptual systems process practical, non-cognitive tasks, for example, would improve the explanatory richness of Bourdieu's theory. However, a physical story like this about embodied understanding is no more required for a valid explanation than is a neural account of mental content. Even Elster does not think that a reductivist account of mental content to neural matter is required for full explanations. The right way to view the physical mechanisms which presumably make embodied understanding possible is as an elaboration, one which leads us further along the path toward causal explanations of action.

<sup>62</sup> See Chapter 1 for a discussion of this comparison.

by causes. It shows how human beings are able to adapt to endlessly modified situations, a skill which is required by ordinary intelligent social action.

Bourdieu's claim is coherent, descriptive, and explanatory. I hope to have made the case for its coherence throughout this chapter. It is descriptively rich inasmuch as Bourdieu uncovers the processes of production and reproduction of social actions where they would otherwise be obscured or invisible (e.g. in the appearance of sexism in something seemingly so banal as culinary taste). It is explanatory because it is fine-grained, meaning that we can distinguish spurious accounts of action from genuine accounts. Bourdieu's argument is not that masculine domination or social inequality is an historical force that mysteriously determines the actions of individuals. His argument is that the embodied understanding of individuals in the social world operates according to norms and schemas inculcated by the social world. That understanding in turn helps to reproduce the social world recursively.

Elster's first critique of Bourdieu is therefore not convincing because he fails to recognize that embodied action is causally motivated. I would suggest that Elster *cannot*, on pain of self-contradiction, recognize this form of motivated embodied behavior, because it is precisely *not* a form of reason-guided activity. Elster takes Bernard Williams' distinction, for example, between "acting with a reason" and "acting for a reason" to show that social behavior can *only* be explained in terms of the reasons for which an agent acted (whereas acting "with a reason" only implies that a reason exists, whether or not it caused the action). (1983, 70) But what Bourdieu's account of motivated embodied behavior shows is that many purposive behaviors are inexplicable as reason-guided activities.

Propositional mental content, according to this account, is an instance, but not the very form, of motivated behavior. (Wrathall, 2005, 116-117) The phenomena described by an account of embodied practical sense indicate that the possibility of action being caused by reasons is typically a response to the breakdown of normal, non-conscious coping. Usually and for the most part, the social world, as Bourdieu argues, is full of calls to order that, like the way a red-light

triggers deeply rooted bodily dispositions to slow down and stop, do not pass through consciousness. (2000, 176) Motivated behavior explains those actions that are purposive but require no reference to the logical relationship in which propositions stand to one another – in short, to mental content – in order to function normally. (Wrathall, 2005, 113) Rather, “we experience our environment at least partly in terms of the activities it immediately leads us to perform.” (Kelly, 2005, 102) Giddens put the same idea nicely, writing, “practical consciousness consists of all the things which actors know tacitly about how to ‘go on’ in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression.”<sup>63</sup> (1986, xxiii)

This account of motivated practical action coherently depicts the microprocesses of social action. It provides a “fine-grained” explanation of the micro-events leading from an agent’s disposition (rather than her mental content) to her actions. Indeed, Bourdieu’s individual studies of particular social fields can be understood to be directed at precisely this task.

Finally, then, it is easy to see that Bourdieu’s model of practical sense does not fall prey to Elster’s second critique, because the appearance of teleology which Elster takes to be the sign of a postulated “demonic plan” reflects instead the orchestration between *habitus* and field that operates recursively through the microprocesses of bodily knowledge.<sup>64</sup> Like language objectified in dictionaries, social fields embody history in the form of institutions and practices, but this is not to say that those fields are “subjectless processes” or “actions without actors.” (Elster, 2007, 228) The recursive constitution of those fields means that they are in fact built out of the dispositions of individuals whose actions those fields enable and also constrain. What’s more, to speak of intelligent bodies, as Bourdieu does, is to substantiate and give phenomenological detail to the very idea of subjectivity. It makes no sense, then, to accuse

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<sup>63</sup> We must interpret the idea of “practical consciousness” carefully, for we really want to say, “practical activity,” which may or may not also be conscious. I also prefer not to speak of practical understanding as tacit knowledge. For my reasons, see Chapter Four.

<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Bourdieu also explicitly repudiates the picture of social life as a “functionalism of the worst case,” in which all social structures are aimed at producing the worst of all possible worlds. He argues that this fantasy of a conspiracy and of an evil will haunts critical social theory. (1992, 79 and 102)

Bourdieu of objective teleology on the order of collectivism, as Elster does. And it makes even less sense to accuse his model of postulating a “demonic design” for oppression. In fact, what Elster takes to be a demonic plan in fact represents an advantage of Bourdieu’s approach, for Bourdieu’s explanation of sexism, for example, demonstrates the reproduction of an historic social structure through the processes of embodied individual action. Bourdieu is able to show the historical mechanisms of what appears otherwise to be an eternal social sexual structure. (2001, vii) This is no demonic design or action without an actor; it is a depiction of social processes being created and recreated through the actions of individuals.

A failure endemic to functionalist social theories, of which Elster believes Bourdieu’s theory to be an instance, is the act of replacing explanations by way of the causal microprocesses of action with assumptions about “action at a distance.” As I have argued, Bourdieu’s account of embodied practical sense represents an adequate account of such microprocesses and is therefore no theory of action at a distance. One reason why critics such as Elster may fail to see this point, Bourdieu suggests, is that there is a great tendency in social explanation to fasten exclusively to plainly visible processes of social reproduction. Bourdieu’s suggestion is not that we ought to neglect those visible processes, but that we must also tune our vision of the social world to those mechanisms of reproduction that occur obliquely to individuals’ awareness. To say that the microprocesses of social action are limited to those actions and interaction which are plainly visible to social actors is as false as was the suggestion made by critics of Newton’s theory of gravitation who argued that *obviously* no mode of causality could occur between objects other than collision and direct contact. (Bourdieu, 1982, 41-42) This intuition about broadening our understanding of causality is similar to the one that stands behind Bourdieu’s concept of *illusio*, a concept which accounts for the ways that bodies invest in the stakes inherent in social fields.

*Illusio and Misrecognition*

The idea of *illusio*, or misrecognition, is meant to explain the obliqueness of bodily knowledge to conscious awareness, and it is one of Bourdieu's most controversial notions. It is controversial because it threatens to make the theory of practical sense look like an account of "false consciousness." I believe this is a misreading, though a reasonable one. I examine Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* now because it is a concept in the study of social action which is not obviously "seen by the naked eye," so to speak, yet is rich in explanatory power nonetheless. *Illusio* also helps to illustrate how a theory of practical sense explains mindless but intelligent action better than Elster's account of irrational psychic drives. Finally, the concept of *illusio* shows why mentalistic accounts of action tend to become "detached" from the intelligence of ordinary action. I take up this final claim about the problem of "detachment" in social theory in more depth in the next two chapters.

Elster and others may be forgiven for thinking that the theory of practical sense is akin to a theory of false consciousness. The very terms "*illusio*" and "misrecognition" have a Frankfurt School ring to them. These terms are, however, essential elements of Bourdieu's description of embodied sense that is irreducible to conscious intentions. They should not be interpreted in a Marxist or Frankfurt School sense. Bourdieu uses the word *illusio* so as to *avoid* talking about illusions, which are false representations one has in mind. *Illusio* describes the fundamental stake an agent must have in the values constituting a social field in order to participate in that field; or, as Bourdieu would put it, to invest in the *doxa* of that field.<sup>65</sup> His account of the orchestration of categories of perception and taste (*habitus*) with divisions in the social order (fields) operates

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<sup>65</sup> "By investment," Bourdieu writes, "I mean the propensity to act that is born of the relation between a field and a system of dispositions adjusted to the game it proposes, a sense of the game and its stakes that implies at once an *inclination* and an *ability* to play the game, both of which are socially and historically constituted rather than universally given." (1992, 118)

only because this orchestration occurs obliquely to consciousness. This claim is an extension, I believe, of Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "positive indeterminacy" of perception.<sup>66</sup>

*Habitus* functions *because* our schemata of perception and taste are misrecognized, that is, not taken to be schemata at all. Misrecognition enables norms and common sense to be effective. It means that norms can be operative without being perceived as norms, but rather as simply the way things work. Similarly, it means that common sense can be perceived, not as common sense, but simply as sense. Culture, Bourdieu argues, is the site par excellence of misrecognition because it enables social agents to secure social capital without being perceived as pursuing social capital.<sup>67</sup> (2007, 57) *One locates a social order in those perceptions which are, paradoxically, imperceptible, but which are also capable of motivating behavior.* The commitments of an artist, for example, make no sense to a banker, and the careerism of a civil servant is mysterious to a researcher. The sources of the norms, values and common sense which structure these activities generally operate below the threshold of consciousness. We notice such discrepancies in the breakdown of our ordinary expectations, when, for example, a foreign traveler does the "wrong" thing. (2000, 97-98)

Misrecognition explains the alchemical transformation of social space into *habitus* mentioned earlier, for required by that transformation is the disguise of the *doxa* of social fields which provides the stakes to which intellectual productions, tastes, values, etc respond. (1988, 42) *Illusio* is an active term. It has little to do with the veracity of one's representation of reality. Instead, *illusio* is a matter of action and routines. It puts a sense for what one ought to do on equal footing with a sense for simply what "one" does. (2000, 101-102) "The art-lover," Bourdieu writes, "knows no other guide than his love of art, and when he moves, as if by instinct, towards what is, at each moment, the thing to be loved, like some businessmen who make money

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<sup>66</sup> See Chapter Four for more on the concept of positive indeterminacy.

<sup>67</sup> As such, Bourdieu claims, domination is perpetuated through classes schematized by perception who possesses legitimate titles to culture without having to pursue it; dominance is maintained by those who can appear perfectly disinterested in class and culture. (2007, 86)

even when they are not trying to, he is not pursuing a cynical calculation, but his own pleasure, the sincere enthusiasm which, in such matters, is one of the preconditions of successful investment.”<sup>68</sup> (2007, 86)

Bourdieu’s account of *illusio* enables his account of social action to succeed where Elster’s cannot. As I argued in Chapter Two, Elster’s account of irrational psychic drives is conceptually incoherent. In the production of states that are essentially by-products, such as sour grapes, Elster requires psychic drives to do the work reasons can’t. But to call such mechanisms psychic drives on Elster’s lights must mean that they are either psychic – that is, a form of mental content – or drives – that is, a form of mechanical causality. Elster recognizes no alternative microprocesses of social action akin to intelligent coping. Elster then labels those actions generated by psychic drives irrational (i.e. formed in the wrong way). The ambiguous definition of psychic drives in Elster’s account of social action is indicative of his failure to explain ordinary intelligent social action. Bourdieu’s account is better, for where Elster must rely on ambiguously defined psychic drives in order to putatively explain irrational actions, Bourdieu can account for them in terms of the practical sense of ordinary social actors. More specifically, Bourdieu can show how ostensibly irrational actions represent practical responses to the stakes inherent in particular social fields. His account, therefore, is explanatory where Elster’s is not.

Ostensibly irrational assessments of probability, of the sort studied by Kahneman and Tversky, for example, are not simply the result of poor calculations of probability, Bourdieu argues. They are not necessarily lapses in otherwise rational creatures. Rather than define them

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<sup>68</sup> By calling the transformation of social space into mental space “alchemical,” Bourdieu does not mean to appeal to a mysterious or magical force. Consider, for example, his account of misrecognition at work in the philosophical field: “All those who profess to be philosophers have a life-or-death interest, qua philosophers, in the existence of this repository of consecrated texts, a mastery of which constitutes the core of their specific capital. Thus, short of jeopardizing their own existence as philosophers and the symbolic powers ensuing from this title, they can never carry through the breaks which imply a practical epoche of the thesis of the existence of philosophy, that is, a denouncement of the tacit contract defining the conditions of membership in the field, a repudiation of the fundamental belief in the conventions of the game and values of the stakes, a refusal to grant the indisputable signs of recognition – references and reverence, *obsequium*, respect for convention even in their outrages – in short, everything which secures recognition of membership.” (2007, 496) From the canon of consecrated texts to the proper sense of decorum, the stakes into which *illusio* is an investment are rather mundane.



negatively, by what poor calculators of probability can't manage to do, Bourdieu attempts to show what social actors exhibiting such characteristics may in fact be accomplishing. The capacity to make rational calculations or defer gratification – essential reflections of putatively rational action – are elements of a particular *habitus*, one which responds to fields in which the deferral of gratification is at a premium and is perceived as better than the “spontaneous materialism” valued in fields common to working classes, for example. (2007, 180) What Elster takes to be irrationality, Bourdieu sees as potential (nonconscious) *strategies* for action. It is my contention that this latter approach has more explanatory power. If true, it answer “why” questions about social action with reference to learned responses to the stakes that structure social fields, whether those responses are rational or not. Rationality, on Bourdieu's lights, is a social competence, one with which agents in certain social fields are endowed and others are not (or are not to the same degree). He writes:

Like the entrepreneurial spirit or the propensity to invest, economic information is a function of one's power over the economy. This is, on the one hand, because the propensity to acquire it depends on the chances of using it successfully, and the chances of acquiring it depend on the chances of using it; and also because economic competence, like all competence (linguistic, political, etc.), far from being a simple technical capacity acquired in certain conditions, is a power tacitly conferred on those who have power over the economy or (as the very ambiguity of the word 'competence' indicates) an attribute of status. (1990, *Logic*, 64)

Ultimately, Bourdieu argues, we have to see the body as an instrument of knowledge, rather than a hindrance to it. This is what his theory of practical sense is meant to achieve. Its goal, in sum, is to allow us to see creativity without creative intentions, finality without a conscious aiming at ends, regularity without rules, and significance without signifying intentions. (2000, 137) Each of these claims helps to explain ordinary intelligent action.

I want to conclude this chapter by noting the outline of Bourdieu's argument about what he calls the *Skolé*, which represents the *doxa* of the scholastic social field. I will have more to say about Bourdieu's theory of the *Skolé* in Chapters Four and Five. The central point here is that

Elster's account of social action, on Bourdieu's lights, is guilty of a "scholastic fallacy" because it puts a "philosopher in the machine" in order to explain ordinary intelligent action. Doing so detaches Elster's account from ordinary action in a way that Bourdieu's model of practical sense does not. On this point, Bourdieu writes:

It is not unusual for the advocates of 'rational action theory' to claim allegiance alternately, in the same text, with the mechanist vision, which is implied in their recourse to models borrowed from physics, and with the teleological vision, each being rooted in the scholastic opposition between pure consciousness and the body-as-thing (I am thinking in particular of Jon Elster, who has the merit of stating explicitly that he identifies rationality with conscious lucidity and that he regards any adjustment of desires to the possibilities that is secured by obscure psychological forces as a form of irrationality). It is thus possible for them to explain the rationality of practices, indifferently, by the hypothesis that agents act under the direct constraint of causes that the scientist is able to identify, or by the knowledge of the situation ('en connaissance de cause,' as the phrase goes) and are capable of doing by themselves what the scientist does in their place in the mechanist hypothesis.<sup>69</sup> (2000, 139)

Bourdieu attributes the schematization of rationality/irrationality ubiquitous throughout accounts of social action to the *habitus* of the scholastic field, which, he believes, is prone to objectify experience from a theoretical point of view because such fields valorize the distance from *praxis* required by such a schema. (2000, 138) Bourdieu's critique of Elster is a second-order critique of social theory itself, one which is parasitic upon Bourdieu's own first-order critique of traditional accounts of social action. It elucidates the way in which social theory can become problematically detached from ordinary social action. Elster's view is susceptible to this problem of detachment because it calls ordinary intelligent practices irrational when they do not reflect the values or ideals of the theorist's model. This "scholastic fallacy" has particularly

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<sup>69</sup> Bourdieu either misreads Elster by identifying him with RAT, or, more plausibly, accuses Elster of being less able to distinguish himself from RAT than Elster himself claims. Such a charge against Elster is consistent with my critique toward the end of Chapter 1. Elster's "psychic drives" are parasitic upon the concept of lucid mental content he seeks to leave behind in RAT. One should note in this passage, also, that when Bourdieu speaks of "teleological" explanation, he refers to end-directed rational action, not functionalism.

noxious effects in normative accounts of social action, which are the subject of the next two chapters.

## Charles Taylor's *Verstehen* Thesis and Positively Indeterminate Phenomena

Between ethos and logos, practical mastery and verbal mastery, there is a radical discontinuity.

–Bourdieu,  
*Distinction*, 461

It is important for philosophical theory to be aware that the distinct and evident are prized and why they are. But it is equally important to note that the dark and twilight abound.

-Dewey, "Experience and Philosophic Method," 265

In what follows, I will offer a critique of Charles Taylor's normative theory on the basis of an interpretation of his theory of agency. The core claim of Taylor's *Verstehen* thesis is that self-interpretation, at either an individual or cultural level, increases the transparency of ideals, values and motivations and that increased self-transparency has obviously desirable normative implications for social agents. I will attempt to show, to the contrary, that some social skills as well as some important social practices are disabled or distorted by practices of interpretation in Taylor's sense. Those practices of interpretation form the core of his *Verstehen* approach to social theory. As a result, in turn, the pragmatic efficacy of *Verstehen* social theory is limited.

Should this critique ring true, it can only be understood as a failure on Taylor's own lights, given that he views theory as a form of praxis meant to improve ordinary social practices.

Taylor's view of social theory is close to my own, all things considered. In particular, his focus on the practical understanding of social actors is perhaps the most recognizable instantiation in the philosophy of social science of a Heideggerian or quasi-Heideggerian account of social action. I take up a critique of Taylor, however, because I believe that he imports unwarranted ideals about conceptuality and language into his account of practical understanding and that he does so to the detriment of his own goals. As a result, the shortcomings of Taylor's view highlight what I take to be a long-standing and problematic prejudice in Western culture and philosophy. That prejudice assumes that our lives and our practices are always improved when their meaning is made explicit.

At this point in the dissertation I begin to examine the relationship between normative social theories and intelligent action. In this chapter and the next, my argument will be that the effectiveness of normative social theories to achieve their own prescriptions depends in important ways on those theories' conceptions of intelligent action. In this chapter, I pursue this argument with respect to the "positive indeterminacy" of ordinary intelligent action. I borrow this concept from Merleau-Ponty, who showed that some perceptual phenomena must remain indeterminate, ambiguous or opaque in order to function normally. I broaden the concept of positively indeterminate phenomena in order to characterize a whole range of mundane social skills which require practical sense and which may be distorted, disabled or ruined by excessive higher-order attention. My claim about such social skills is therefore stronger than a perhaps more familiar epistemic one about the degree to which social theorists can know the motives and intentions of social actors sufficiently to explain their actions and practices. Though this epistemic question is an important one, my investigation focuses instead on the class of social skills whose motivations, meanings or interpretive clarity is *necessarily* opaque. This is what I mean by saying that some social phenomena are positively indeterminate. Another way of making the point, in terms

Dreyfus uses (about which more shortly), is that the background of practical social skills which make conscious attention possible *must remain in the background* in order to function normally. In order to see *things*, Dreyfus is fond of saying, we must not focus on the light which illuminates them.

I will argue that Taylor's linguistically oriented account of practical understanding obscures this class of positively indeterminate social phenomena. I suggest, in conclusion, that normative social theory must recognize both the gains *and* losses of its own relationship to social practice. In Chapter Five, I will go on to broaden this concern beyond interpretive social theory and examine the effectiveness of normative theories as such with regard to their relationship to ordinary intelligent action.

#### *The Natural Sciences Model and Vulgar Wittgensteinianism*

Taylor's "*Verstehen* thesis" is an interconnected set of claims about human agency, ethics, moral and political philosophy, the study of human societies, the explanation of behavior, the history of western philosophy and more. Despite this diversity, in the introduction to his two-volume collection *Philosophical Papers*, Taylor claims that his work is unified by a hedgehog-like agenda. His self-proclaimed monomaniacal goal is to show why the ubiquitous ambition to model the study of human beings on the natural sciences is both mistaken and undesirable. In sum, his response to this ambition comprises the *Verstehen* thesis. My focus in this chapter will be on the normative aspects of this broadly-based claim.

I will develop my account of Taylor's normative theory through his rejection of two conceptions of social theory, namely, what he calls the "Natural Sciences Model" (NSM) and "Vulgar Wittgensteinianism" (VW; alternately, the "incommensurability thesis"). Taylor develops his critique of the NSM in a number of essays dedicated, in various ways, to explaining and

criticizing the history of what he calls the epistemological tradition in Western philosophy. His attack on the NSM is made from a number of angles, of which I will discuss what I take to be the two most important: a Heideggerian-inspired account of human agency and a Romantic view of “expressivist” language. Later in the chapter I will return to these two themes and show that Taylor’s view of the latter conflicts with his use of the former.

Some of what I will discuss shortly with reference to Heidegger will cover ground familiar from Chapter Three. It is important, however, to cover this terrain from Taylor’s perspective, as it leads him, ultimately, I believe, to a problematic view of normative social theory. It is important to note that Taylor develops his view of practical understanding explicitly in terms of a theory of agency, whereas the principle thinkers I have discussed thus far – Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu – do not. This difference is important because it is out of his account of agency that Taylor develops a normative view regarding the increase of individuals’ agential capacities.

After describing Taylor’s rejection of the NSM, I will describe why so much of his energy is dedicated to “recovering” *Verstehen* social theory from what he takes to be the implications of VW, namely, anti-realism in metaphysics and relativism in normative theory. I will then go on to explain Taylor’s argument that pragmatically effective normative theory obviates the conflation of *Verstehen* social theory and VW, and then I will offer a critique of this argument which shows Taylor’s view of *Verstehen* social theory to be problematic on its own lights.

“Agent” means more than simply “a person,” according to Taylor. Agency entails having purposes – including desires and intentions – which distinguish agential actions from mere events. (1985, *HA*, 99) Machines, plants and rocks can do things, of course, but not with agency. Distinctively *human* agency, furthermore, for Taylor, means more again than simply having purposes. Nor is it sufficient to say, with Harry Frankfurt, that human agents uniquely have “second-order desires,” which are simply desires about desires. (1985, *HA*, 15-16) In order to

attain a distinctively human form of agency, Taylor claims, the agent must be what he calls a “respondent” to the world. (1985, *HA*, 97) Being a respondent to the world means being the kind of entity for whom things matter.

What Taylor means by “mattering” is more radical than Frankfurt’s conception of second-order desires because it rejects the founding assumptions of what Taylor calls the epistemological tradition. This tradition mirrors the one Heidegger accuses of being forgetful of the question of being. In both cases, it is the tradition that mistakes human beings’ ordinary experiences as various ways of knowing about the world. Citing Hegel’s concept of the “upside-down world,” Taylor thinks it is a “terrible and fateful illusion” to think of our most distinctively human experiences as various kinds of knowledge claims. (1995, vii-viii) The way things matter to us is not, first and foremost, as entities to be known. Certainly, human beings have epistemic relations to the world, Taylor recognizes, and certainly these relations are vitally important to virtually all human experiences. The error, however, is to place our epistemic relations to the world in a foundational role. To the contrary, Taylor argues, indirectly citing Heidegger, “the condition of our forming disengaged representations of reality is that we must be already engaged in coping with our world.” (1995, 11)

The purposes, desires, aversions, etc that are characteristic of human agency are not necessarily merely subjective intentions or psychological self-reflections, Taylor believes. Rather, they are ways that human beings are motivated to think, act or feel within situation-specific contexts. Taylor’s conception of motivation, as well as his basic account of agency, is largely copasetic with the arguments I have made about intelligent action in Chapters One and Three. Taylor stresses the fact that being motivated or compelled is ordinarily a practical experience which usually remains in the background of our conscious attention. On both Taylor and my lights, when I walk into a room, for example, the floor solicits me to walk on it. Believing, knowing, or doubting something about the floor is a second-order activity by comparison. A central characteristic of human agency, then, in Taylor’s view, is the experience



of being compelled to respond to practical solicitations given by the social world and responding in the right way. Contrary to the epistemological tradition, which understands human beings' most basic way of being in the world in terms of knowing about it, Taylor claims that human beings are primarily engaged in coping with the world, that is, in acting in it and interacting with entities in it. Engaged coping is constitutive of human agency, then, because, while it may be natural to draw a neat line between objects and the epistemic psychological representations agents have of those objects, it is not nearly so natural to draw a line between an object and the way that an agent *deals* with objects. (1995, 12)

Because the epistemological tradition treats agents primarily as subjects of knowledge-claims, proponents of this view must explain how knowledge causes ordinary human behavior. Human beings seem uniquely adept at acting in socially-sanctioned ways. For my activity to count as "walking on the floor," I must do a particular thing, rather than crawl or skip. In order to solve this problem, rule-following is often suggested as a necessary condition of human agency. Pettit, for example, makes this claim. (1996, 6) Taylor rejects this idea. Seeing how he does so is required in order to understand how he ultimately intends to steer social theory between the NSM and VW.

The central challenge facing the idea that rule-following is a necessary condition for human agency was famously articulated by Wittgenstein. He asks us to imagine a pupil being shown a number series, such as 0,2,4,6,8 . . . who then becomes indignant when that series carries on after 1000 as 1004, 1008, 1012, etc. (2001, 63-64) Wittgenstein's point is that following a rule requires understanding an indefinitely large number of backgrounded assumptions. As Taylor puts it, the "Wittgenstein Problem" shows that an agent not only isn't, but couldn't be aware of a whole host of issues which bear directly on the correct application of a rule without already having an understanding of how to do so. (Taylor, 1995, 165) Rules are paradoxical because they must be at once concrete and particular, such that an agent can follow them and can fail to be

correct when attempting to do so, but they must be infinitely general as well, such that they instruct an agent about what to do over an indefinite and unpredictable number of cases.

Instead of following rules, Taylor suggests that human agents know how to comport themselves in an indefinite number of unique situations because they are responsive to a background of social norms that guide situation-specific behavior.<sup>70</sup> Again, this claim ought to be familiar given my arguments throughout this dissertation. Taylor derives his view from Heidegger's practical rather than propositional conception of understanding, which focuses on the phenomenon of "know-how" (how to do something) rather than "knowing-that" (something is or isn't the case). (1962, 183) This sort of practical knowledge is social in an externalist sense, because the actions of individual agents are only meaningful in light of the social norms into which they fit. Lifting my arm becomes a meaningful action when I follow the appropriate norms, for example, which are not up to me, such that I am now "hailing a cab" or "threatening to hit you" or "scratching my head in puzzlement."

A key element of Taylor's appropriation of Heidegger, and his response to the rule-following problem, is the latter's argument that understanding requires an "as-structure." The as-structure of understanding denotes the fact that when we "have dealings" with entities we understand them "as" something or other. As I suggested in Chapter One, I understand what a hammer is only because I know how to use it *as* a hammer, for example. I don't understand what a hammer is if I use it to comb my hair. The as-structure of understanding means that ordinary coping is possible against the background of an understanding of "being," that is, of what things are. It is crucial to see how Taylor understands and utilizes this Heideggerian point. Taylor calls the understanding of being with which we are able to press into practical possibilities for action the "background of meanings." The background of meanings is a key concept in Taylor's

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<sup>70</sup> Of course, on Taylor's view, human beings have the capacity to follow rules and do so regularly. His point is that rule-following does not account for the most basic and ordinary ways that social action becomes intelligent. Rule-following is a specialized case, in other words, of the general relationship between individual action and social norms. Taylor's claims about "self-interpreting animals" are meant to describe this more general relationship.

account of agency, for which he offers a number of examples. Feelings are constituted by the background of meanings: feeling shameful because I am overweight is only possible within a social world where being overweight counts as a fact worthy of shame. (1985, *HA*, 53)

Relevance is constituted by the background of meanings: it may be true that I have 3,567 hairs on my head, but saying so wouldn't count as a meaningful self-definition, at least not in a culture like ours.<sup>71</sup> (1991, 36) Social practices are constituted by the background of meanings: in order to count as voting, my activity must be the result of a reasonably free choice; I am not really voting for anyone if my choice is forced. (1985, *HS*, 93)

Taylor's rejection of rule-following and his embrace of the idea of a "background of meanings" attack the conception of agency at the heart of the epistemological tradition. Simultaneously, his theory of language is meant to deny the fact that this tradition is capable of offering an adequate description of what he calls "common experiences." Together, these arguments show why Taylor rejects the NSM approach to social theory. Ultimately, they also suggest an important divergence from the account of practical understanding I have been putting forward.

Language, Taylor believes, is the medium through which characteristically human concerns impinge upon us. (1985, *HA*, 260) Taylor develops his account of language through a historical comparison of what he calls "designative" and "expressivist" theories. Designative theories are "object-related" accounts of language. (1985, *HA*, 218) They understand language as a system of signs that refer to entities in the world. Words simply name referents on the designative model. Medieval nominalism was an early designative theory of this sort which argued that the world is comprised only of particular things, each of which can be named by a word. It paved the way for philosophers like Descartes, Bacon and Hobbes to replace the Platonic conception of thought as part of the "furniture of the real" with an instrumental view of

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<sup>71</sup> See Chapter Five for an expanded discussion of the implications of Heidegger's view for the concept of relevance in legal adjudication.

language. (1985, *HA*, 224) Enlightenment thinkers came to regard language as an ideally transparent tool, one that too often interferes with our perceptions of reality. In the designativist tradition, Taylor argues, language became the problem philosophers attempted to see their way through. (1985, *HA*, 225)

Expressivism concretized as a reaction against designative theories of language, although Taylor finds historical precedent for it all the way back in Augustine's idea that God created the world as an expression of his being. (1985, *HA*, 223) The expressive aspect of a language is associated with whatever is made manifest in the expression itself, as distinct from the entity represented by words or the content of the idea depicted. Expressivist theories argue that the meaning of an expression cannot be decomposed into its constituent elements, that is, into the content of the expression and the medium of expression. (1985, *HA*, 219-221) European romanticism marked the height of expressivism.

Taylor explains the central theme of romantic expressivism by way of Herder's critique of Condillac's theory about the origins of language. Condillac suggests a thought experiment about two children stranded on a desert island, the purpose of which is to suggest that language would develop as the children slowly and cumulatively understood each other's gestures as signs of inner experiences, feelings and thoughts. What Herder points out, however, is that Condillac's account assumes what it seeks to prove, namely, the origin of the concept of reference. The question is how the children on the desert island would ever have arrived at the very idea that signs stand for something.<sup>72</sup> (1985, *HA*, 227) Condillac's error reveals the limitations of the designativist view, Taylor suggests. The Romantic response suggested that language must be viewed holistically, or as a web in Humboldt's sense. (1985, *HA*, 231)

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<sup>72</sup> Wittgenstein makes much the same point when rejecting the idea that pointing with one's finger is a naturally readable sign, Taylor notes. Knowing how to interpret the gesture requires not only the concept of reference but also a familiarity with the use of this particular sign. Do I follow the index finger? In which direction? (1995, 133)

Taylor utilizes the expressivist view of language in order to demonstrate the importance of what he calls “common experiences.” Suppose, on a crowded, hot train, a person turns and says to their neighbor, “whew, it’s hot.” Because it is painfully clear to everyone involved that it is indeed hot without anyone having said so, one would be wrong to interpret this expression as a mere transmission of information. Many linguistic expressions, Taylor claims, serve instead to create public space and in turn create what he calls common experiences. (1985, *HA*, 265) The expression, “whew, it’s hot,” creates an experience that *we* undergo, in the same sense that two people dancing together does not amount to the same thing as two people dancing. Only the former is a genuinely social activity, one that is not marked just by physical proximity (I can dance by myself near to another). Taylor speaks of “common” and “integrated” agents, and argues that many social practices cannot be understood without holistic descriptions of this sort, descriptions that are enabled by an expressivist view of language. (1995, 171)

Common experiences require what Taylor calls “intersubjective meanings,” which are linguistic concepts shared by social agents. Intelligent coping requires the ability to ascribe an import to a situation, in Taylor’s terms. The import of a situation is what makes the situation what it is; a menacing situation, for example, is one in which an agent feels fearful because he or she has ascribed menace to the situation. (1985, *HA*, 49) Intersubjective meanings are shared import ascriptions. They make common experiences and social practices possible. Intersubjective meanings are therefore not consensuses or convergences of opinion, but are rather the condition of possibility for consensuses or convergence. (1985, *HS*, 37) What counts as ending negotiations or offering a new deal within bargaining practices, for example, are “constitutive distinctions” of the practice itself; the practice is built out of the intersubjective meanings agents ascribe to it, in other words. (1985, *HS*, 34) These meanings are constitutive of the practice, and thus require an expressivist account of language, because bargaining is nothing but the practice assembled by the intersubjective meanings understood by the participants.

Taylor's theory of language shows, then, that one cannot easily distinguish social reality from the meanings, values, or interpretations social agents have of that reality. Taylor's Heideggerian account of agency shows, furthermore, that *making* this distinction – between reality and interpretations, evaluations, reflections, representations, or phenomenal appearances of it – is a second-order activity made possible by human beings' primary engagement with their environment. Combined, Taylor's accounts of language and agency demonstrate why he rejects the NSM approach to social theory.

The NSM treats agents' meanings, values and interpretations as subjective, psychological or epiphenomenal representations of reality. It is modeled on the distinction between appearance and reality which is constitutive of the natural sciences, which was perhaps instantiated most clearly in the distinction made by 17<sup>th</sup> century epistemological theories between primary and secondary qualities. In linguistic terms, the NSM makes an analogous and fundamental distinction between referents and words. Social entities are, furthermore, treated as data to be studied in the hypothetico-deductive manner scientists study any kind of data. It should be clear, then, that Taylor's attack on the NSM sets his brand of social theory deeply at odds with most mainstream approaches to the philosophy of social science. (Alternately, it suggests that Taylor's project is simply not intended to be social theory in the usual sense, but this seems to be splitting hairs.) Subjective representations tend to influence our descriptions of reality, many social scientists grant, and some take this recognition to be synonymous with the *Verstehen* thesis. On this view, Taylor's claim that the *Geisteswissenschaften* are fundamentally distinct from the *Naturwissenschaften* seems specious.<sup>73</sup> But this claim is based in a misreading, for the

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<sup>73</sup> Føllesdal argues, for example, that the hermeneutic study of meaning is simply a variety of scientific inquiry. *Verstehen* approaches to social theory are simply the hypothetico-deductive method of the natural sciences applied to meaningful texts, he argues. (1994, 240) This claim is meant to reject Taylor's depiction of the insuperability of the language of description of social reality from social reality itself. Føllesdal believes that social experience can be studied in much the same way as the data of any scientific hypothesis can be studied, namely, by constructing hypothesis about it and proving them deductively. Føllesdal's argument is construed as a rejection of the idea, ascribed to Taylor, that the *Verstehen* researcher influences the subject matter she studies in such a way as to make a scientific claim about that

fundamental argument of the *Verstehen* thesis is that the objects of social science are not, in fact, objects at all, in the traditional scientific sense. They do not form what Taylor calls “brute data” which may or may not be unduly influenced by subjective representations. Instead, the *Geisteswissenschaften* ought to study, Taylor believes, meaning itself.

However, Taylor also intends to distinguish his approach to social theory from older incarnations of the *Verstehen* thesis, particularly those associated with Peter Winch. Winch sought to avoid something like the NSM by showing that the goal of social science is to explain social practices from social agents’ points of view. Taylor agrees that social explanations must take the first-person point of view seriously, but he does not believe that doing so means that any social agent’s point of view is incorrigible. (1981, 191 and 197) This is VW, which Taylor rejects. In purporting to take the agent’s point of view seriously, VW ends up undermining it. When a person says, “this is how I see it,” the *Verstehen* social scientist must take their claim *to truth* seriously, Taylor argues. On the assumption that another person might see things differently (and assuming that the issues between them are not simply incommensurable), to call both perspectives incorrigible is to suggest that neither truth claim is serious. (1981, 200-201) A good social theory, in the end, Taylor argues, must make sense of the agents’ activities, that is, see how they came to do what they did, but it must not also be satisfied with recovering their self-descriptions. (1985, *HS*, 116-117) A theoretical account makes the agent’s doings clearer than they were to her; it takes account of how the agent sees things and what is wrong potentially with her view. (1985, *HS*, 118) Taylor calls this account of social theory “non-vulgar Wittgensteinianism,” and he claims that it both warrants non-relativistic normative theory and counts as a form of metaphysical social realism.

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subject matter impossible. Similarly, Michael Martin argues that Taylor’s *Verstehen* thesis overestimates the “theoretical premise influence” researchers have over their subject matter. (1994, 267) This overestimation renders Taylor’s approach problematically “subjective.” (1994, 270)

This is a difficult claim for Taylor to maintain. His principle argument against the NSM is that no social reality exists to be studied outside of our language of description of it. This claim may be limited to distinctively social phenomena, for Taylor does tend to have a straightforwardly realist attitude about natural phenomena. But with a practice like bargaining, for example, there is no phenomenon to be studied that antedates the meanings which define that practice. Taylor's claim cannot therefore reduce to one about influence, prejudice or even supervenience. With regard to social phenomena, he is no perspectivalist, because the very notion of data upon which one could have a perspective, duly or unduly influenced, is parasitic upon a distinction between reality and meaning that Taylor takes to be false.

This fact makes the *Verstehen* thesis quite radical. Language, structured by intersubjective meanings, appears to be all-encompassing, akin perhaps to a Wittgensteinian language game or a Foucauldian *epistēmē*. (Taylor himself suggests as much, comparing his view of language to Foucault's early account of "the order of things" constituted by historical *epistēmē*. (1985, *HS*, 142)) Just as the rules that govern the movement of the pieces on a chessboard are constitutive of the game itself, the norms embodied by the background of meanings, which take linguistic form in intersubjective meanings, are constitutive of any given social reality. (1985, *HS*, 34) (The relationship between the background of meanings and intersubjective meanings may seem vague at this point. I believe it is vague in Taylor's own account. More on this important ambiguity soon.) While emphasizing how radically our intersubjective meanings have changed over time, Taylor's rich intellectual history of Western civilization underscores the strong quality of his claim. A "refutation" of Galileo's discovery of the moons of Jupiter, for example, demonstrates how fundamentally foreign a bygone construal of intersubjective meaning can seem to us:

There are seven windows given to animals in the domicile of the head, through which their air is admitted to the tabernacle of the body, to enlighten, to warm and to nourish it. What are these parts of the microcosmos: Two nostrils, two eyes, two ears and a mouth.



So in the heavens, as in the macrocosmos, there are two favourable stars, two unpropitious, two luminaries, and Mercury undecided and indifferent. From this and from many other similarities in nature, such as the seven metals, etc., which it were tedious to enumerate, we gather that the number of planets is necessarily seven. (1985, *HS*, 141)

Intersubjective meanings so thoroughly saturate any given social world that it seems as if one could never grasp an aspect of reality existing independently of them. Hypothetico-deductive models of social science fail, then, for example, as a science of comparative politics, because they take the “data” to be explained – “interest aggregation,” for example, in bargaining practices – as merely given rather than as embedded in and constituted by a web of intersubjective meanings. (1985, *HS*, 42) Interest aggregation is not an object in the world on which multiple descriptive languages can offer various perspectives. To think that this is so can be disastrous for a social science, Taylor argues, leading to historically familiar ethnocentric pitfalls.

This claim seems to imply both anti-realism with respect to social properties and normative relativism. But Taylor explicitly claims that his position is metaphysically realist and that it warrants non-relativistic judgments, not only of the epistemic status of a given description of reality, but of the ethical value of social and personal practices as well. In an interesting reversal of traditional approaches to this problem, Taylor claims that the realism of the *Verstehen* thesis is in fact warranted *by* its ability to make non-relativistic judgments. I will now describe this argument and then show where I think it goes wrong.

### *Pragmatic Normative Social Theory*

The admitted difficulty of the *Verstehen* thesis, according to Taylor, is that it at one and the same time recognizes that linguistic formulations are constitutive of the social realities under scrutiny *and* that these formulations can be right or wrong. The nature of being engaged agents

“rules out absolute, that is, complete and self-evidently incorrigible knowledge,” Taylor writes, “but this contact also rules out total error.” (2005, 48) Taylor develops his account of pragmatic normative social theory initially through the development of an ideal of human flourishing in terms of what he calls “strong evaluation.”

Taylor’s notion of strong evaluation is meant to capture another necessary condition for human agency which Frankfurt’s view of “second-order desires” leaves out. The concept of strong evaluation does the work of distinguishing epistemic facts about agents – that I desire  $x$  or that I have a desire to desire  $x$  – from motivated ways of responding to, or dealing with, the world. Taylor introduces the concept by suggesting that weak evaluations are those that are concerned merely with outcomes. It is sufficient for something to be judged good on the lights of a weak evaluation simply because of the fact that I desire it. I want to be a healthy person, for example, and thus it is a good for me to stop overeating. Strong evaluations, by contrast, are concerned with the worth of our purposes, beliefs, desires, aversions, etc. (1985, *HA*, 17-18) It is not sufficient, on the lights of a strong evaluation, that I simply desire the thing in question. A strong evaluation of reasons to stop overeating would be my judgment that people who overeat are slovenly or captive to low aspirations or not admirable for some reason. While weak evaluations are merely instrumental, strong evaluations are concerned with the quality of one’s reasons for desiring one thing or another. Thus, Taylor points out, there would be no problem on the lights of a weak evaluation with taking a pill, if one existed, to stop my tendency to overeat, but doing so on the lights of strong evaluations would not achieve my intent. No pill could fulfill my intention to be a disciplined person, for example. (1985, *HA*, 22) Importantly, second-order desires could be either weak or strong. I can hope to end my cravings to overeat but not necessarily for a strongly motivated reason. The necessary condition of having strong evaluations is the capacity to make distinctions between the worth of beliefs, desires, inclinations, etc. These distinctions characterize uniquely human agency (1995, 106) and they are made possible through human beings’ primary engaged dealings with the world.

Strong evaluation is not only a conceptual requirement for human agency, however, according to Taylor. Because he rejects the relativistic conclusions of suggesting that successful social agency amounts to correctly following local norms, Taylor builds a conception of human flourishing into his conception of strong evaluation. The path to this ideal is a process of interpreting our intersubjective meanings. In short, Taylor's claim is that engaging in the practice of interpretation, which is the attempt to make clear, make sense of, or bring to light an underlying coherence or sense (1985, *HS*, 118), enables social agents to become flourishing human beings.

Intersubjective meanings are often tacit and unrecognized. I don't have to say "I'm macho" in order to act macho, nor do I even have to recognize myself as macho. But I *do* have to have the ability to tell what being macho entails in some given situation in order to act macho. (1985, *HA*, 268) This capacity to sense what a norm demands is interpretative, Taylor believes. We are constantly interpreting the intersubjective meanings at play in any situation-specific understanding. Working to clarify our often tacit and unrecognized interpretations of intersubjective meanings is how ordinary social agency becomes human flourishing, in Taylor's view. Agents who clarify their own interpretations are capable of having deeper, fuller and richer emotional experiences, Taylor believes. (1985, *HA*, 23-23 and 56) Initially, Taylor defined human agency in terms of strong evaluation in order to draw a contrast with beings whose desires are limited to de facto preferences. Now, it becomes clear that human agency is something one can succeed or fail to achieve. Taylor cites the ability to appreciate Bach as an example. (1985, *HA*, 25) Finding a way of ranking the worth of our desires is a requirement for flourishing forms of human agency. (1985, *HA*, 66) This process of ranking amounts to making our interpretations clearer; the better the articulation, the deeper the insight can be. (1985, *HA*, 63)

This claim – that self-interpretation implies self-transparency and that self-transparency necessarily has desirable normative implications for social agents – is the core element of Taylor's *Verstehen* thesis. It is the claim I mean to challenge. Like his view about flourishing

forms of individual agency, the essence of Taylor's pragmatic normative social theory, which distinguishes his *Verstehen* thesis from VW, is that social theorists can aid the interpretive process of self-clarification and self-definition at a cultural level and thus improve the health of a culture. Social theory articulates a culture's tacit interpretations of social reality, thus rendering the intersubjective meanings constitutive of those interpretations clearer. The aim of social theory is, in other words, to articulate and elucidate the constitutive norms of a culture. (1985, *HS*, 93) Taylor also calls these constitutive norms our "motivating ideals."

Taylor demonstrates the workings of this project in *The Ethics of Authenticity*. There, he makes three essential claims: authenticity is a valid ideal (1), one about which we can argue in reason (2), the consequences of which make a difference in social life (3). (1991, 23)

Authenticity, generally, means being true to oneself or to the motivating ideals that structure one's self-interpretations. The first claim is meant to show that authenticity is a deeply rooted value in our culture, one which compels persons to act in specific ways in specific situations. Authenticity is an object of common experience, the meaning of which we ought to articulate. (1991, 80)

Taylor's second claim is meant to dispel any ascription of an incorrigibility thesis to his argument. By way of demonstration, he quarrels with Allan Bloom's condemnation of modern society as relativistic and egotistical in *The Closing of the American Mind*. Taylor does not necessarily contest Bloom's empirical claims, but takes issue instead with Bloom's idea that a culture of "self-fulfillment" is one that has no motivating ideals. Taylor believes, in contrast, that self-fulfillment is itself a motivating ideal, one that compels people to overwork, for example, at the expense of spending time with their families. (1991, 15-17) The point is that these arguments consist of fallible claims upon which reasonable debate can be had. Taylor's third claim – that having these debates is a meaningful endeavor with real consequences – indicates the normative aspect of the *Verstehen* thesis. Articulating the motivating ideals that constitute our social practices renders them open for reasonable debate and reconstitution. "Our evaluations are

articulations of insights which are frequently partial, clouded and uncertain,” Taylor claims, “but they are all the more open to challenge when we reflect.” (1985, *HA*, 39)

This third claim of Taylor’s ethics of authenticity is fundamentally tied to his claim about the fallibility of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. It clarifies Taylor’s view that linguistic expressions, though constitutive of the objects expressed, are corrigible and non-relativistic. *Verstehen* social theory is fallible and open to challenge in the sense that a practice can be evaluated in light of its motivating ideals. Cultural conceptions of rights, for example, ought to be derived from a process of uncovering, and debating about, those capacities we deem worthy of respect for human agents. (1985, *HS*, 192-193) Debates about rights can then be followed by debates about what institutions best foster those capacities which rights are meant to respect. (1985, *HS*, 205) The fallibility of these debates is pragmatic, inasmuch as their evaluative standard is nothing more than the success of the practice at hand. In social theory, Taylor believes, we have no “yardstick” independent of our practices by which to measure them. Instead, the value of a social theory is determined by its effects upon social practice.<sup>74</sup> Just as Taylor built a conception of human flourishing into his account of agency, he builds a conception of truth into his account of social interpretation. Because social reality does not antedate intersubjective meanings, this conception of truth will not resemble a correspondence theory. Instead, a good social theory enables social agents to do more things, and to do them with a deeper and richer sense of their own activities. (1985, *HS*, 147) By making our interpretations explicit, social theorists enable social agents to debate about those interpretations and compare them with other interpretations. Granted, the

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<sup>74</sup> Taylor does not specify exactly *how* social theories affect ordinary social practices. This question – about the affective relationship between theory and social practice – is largely the subject of Chapter Five of this dissertation. For Taylor, social theory is a kind of social practice. He draws no sharp line between academic social theories and higher-order reflection generally. His point is presumably that he does *not* have to, nor does he have to explain the relationship of academic social theory to ordinary social practices in terms of cause and effect. One cannot separate a social theory from the practices it is meant to affect because social theorists are constitutively involved in the world of practice. Theories *are* kinds of practices. Thus, for Taylor, the question, from a normative perspective, is what kind of practice social theorizing is. His answer: a very good one.

truth of any interpretation will always itself be interpretive. But Taylor does not believe that this fact condemns him to a relativistic position.<sup>75</sup>

One might question the tenability of a non-correspondence theory of interpretive truth like Taylor's.<sup>76</sup> One might also wonder whether non-relativism in social theory really entails metaphysical realism, in Taylor's idiosyncratic sense. Despite what he says, it is difficult to see how Taylor's position amounts to anything other than anti-realism with regard to social entities. I am content, however, to ignore these problems for the most part. Whether or not Taylor is *really* a realist is an interesting question, but more important for my purposes is whether his understanding of social phenomena warrants the normative ends to which he aims social theory. Taylor's critique of "welfarism" helps to elucidate this question. The central issue is whether Taylor can expect success for *Verstehen* social theory even on his own measure of success.

Welfarism amounts to the claim that public goods are decomposable into individual utilities. (1995, 127) Taylor believes that Amartya Sen dealt a strong blow to welfarism by showing the fragility of its utilitarian assumptions. (1995, 128) He seeks to add another blow by exposing and undermining welfarism's individualist and subjectivist assumptions. The former assumption is that social collectivities are decomposable into individual entities; the latter is that values are equivalent to de facto preferences. (1995, 130) Individualist assumptions distort the phenomena of public goods, an example of which is the ideal of participatory self-rule. Taylor's claim is not that participatory self-rule is necessarily valuable, but rather that the phenomenon of a public good of its sort is distorted by an individualist interpretation. Individualism makes

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<sup>75</sup> Taylor believes this point to be a contrast between his own view and those of Nietzsche and Foucault. The latter espouses a position of "monolithic relativism," Taylor believes, one which cannot make sense of a social agent's first-person perspective. (1985, *HS*, 182) Notwithstanding the correctness of Taylor's reading of Foucault, the point to notice here is the way Taylor connects a logical argument about relativism to a pragmatic argument about the uses of Foucault's social theory. Because it is ostensibly incorrigible, Foucault's theory is essentially severed from the agent's own experience, which means that it cannot enable her to become a more successful, or deeper and richer, social agent.

<sup>76</sup> This may not be a safe assumption. It has been the subject of extensive scholarship. The debate between Gadamer and Habermas, for example, centers on just this question, namely, whether or not a hermeneutic approach to social theory is capable of distinguishing legitimate and illegitimate traditions, or more broadly, whether an interpretive approach to social theory is condemned to relativism.

public goods look like instruments for the benefit of individuals and the achievement of their preferences. As such, it construes public goods as entities that are good because people desire them. (1995, 142) A public value like participatory self-rule is, instead, constitutive of a given community, Taylor believes. And this is why the subjectivist assumption distorts the phenomena as well, for we can only speak about public goods as constitutive of public experiences given an account of intersubjective meanings and common experiences, both of which exist not within the minds of subjects that possess de facto preference but rather within the normative linguistic practices of a community. (1995, 134) Showing his Hegelian cards, it turns out, on Taylor's lights, against subjectivism, that articulating one's own motivating ideals is only possible when those ideals are connected to a wider whole, namely, the social world in which they are born.

Public goods are entities constituted by intersubjective meanings, namely those that promote flourishing common experiences. Welfarism fails to see this, the consequences of which are that social theorists often engage in the wrong debates (about, for example, preference maximization). The right debate, Taylor argues, is a moral one, comparing the public goods valued by welfarism with other possible public goods. Welfarism hides its own moral richness, in other words (1995, 145), and the task of social theory is to articulate the content of its potential wealth. (1995, 55) In doing so, a good social theory enables a process of contestable comparisons between the relative richness and impoverishment of social practices and their motivating ideals.

### *Conceptuality, Discourse, and Interpretation*

My concern focuses on the vagueness of Taylor's account of exactly *what* comes to be made explicit through the process of articulating our culture's motivating ideals. Analogously, *what* is made explicit when agents reflect upon their own strong evaluations in order to become deeper human beings? Both aspects of Taylor's project are interpretative, and on account of his

expressivist view of language, it follows that interpretation in his sense consists of interpreting interpretations. Strong evaluators and *Verstehen* social theorists alike are “self-interpreting animals,” according to Taylor.

Earlier I mentioned that the relationship between the background of meanings and intersubjective meanings is vague in Taylor’s account of human agency. This vagueness is due to the fact that the background of meanings, in Heidegger’s sense of the as-structure of understanding, is not necessarily interpretative or linguistic. (There is significant scholarly debate on this question; see below.) But on Taylor’s view, particularly in light of his contention that social theory is fallible because it can enable more successful social practices, human activity appears to be interpretation “all the way down.” It would be deeply problematic for Taylor’s social theory if this were not so, if, that is to say, some aspect of human understanding could only be called an interpretation with attendant phenomenological and practical distortion. Taylor’s vague distinction between the background of meanings and intersubjective meaning indicates that he holds a linguistic interpretation of Heidegger’s conception of understanding, one which may or may not be warranted. We must then turn back to Heidegger for a moment in order to see how Taylor navigates the scholarly fault lines regarding Heidegger’s view. I do so not because Heidegger has a definitive claim to the truth about human agency and language, but rather, because the way in which one interprets ordinary practical coping in relation to language deeply shapes what one thinks is possible to do by making our linguistic articulations explicit.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger does not have much to say about language as such, but he does give significant attention to the concept he calls *Rede*, the meaning of which is a subject of debate between scholars. *Rede* translates more or less to “discourse,” but at issue is whether or not *Rede* is meaningfully different from language as such. One camp in this debate – associated most prominently with Christina Lafont, Charles Guignon, and Taylor (though more obliquely) – think that *Rede* is virtually indistinguishable from language. Guignon, for example, writes, “there is no way to identify a nonsemantic field of meaning which can be grasped independently of the



language that serves to constitute it.” (1983, 118) Opposing the “language” camp, Dreyfus, John Haugeland and William Blattner have argued that *Rede* is significantly different from language. Dreyfus translates *Rede* as “telling,” in the sense that one can “tell the time,” “tell what needs to be done,” or “tell one thing from another.” (2001, *BITW*, 215) Dreyfus et al’s argument is pragmatic; on their lights, *Rede* refers to the way in which agents’ practical understanding articulates what can and ought to be done. In making this argument, Dreyfus implicitly utilizes a distinction Heidegger makes between two senses of the word “articulation.” Heidegger uses two verbs each of which translates in English as “to articulate:” *artikulieren* and *gliedern*. Although he does not seem to keep these terms methodologically distinct, they do have distinct meanings. Articulation can refer, in Taylor’s sense, to the process of making something explicit, but it can also refer to the organization or “jointedness” of things. A skeleton is articulated in this second sense, as are the kingdom, phyla, genera, etc of natural organisms. Dreyfus’ translation of *Rede* as “telling” is meant to follow this distinction, inasmuch as “telling the time” is a pragmatic capacity that articulates the day temporally.

*Rede* is a peculiar concept. The pragmatic claim shows that *Rede* cannot be equivalent to language, because, on Heidegger’s view, *Rede* “first makes language possible ontologically.” (1962, 206) This pragmatic view – and Dreyfus’ translation of articulation as “telling” in particular – makes *Rede* seem equivalent to existential understanding. The linguistic claim, however, shows that *Rede* cannot be equivalent to existential understanding, because Heidegger claims that *Rede* is one of three “equiprimordial” conditions of *Dasein*, along with understanding and “mood.” (1962, 203) The central point is that *Rede* must add something to Heidegger’s conception of understanding and mood, but it cannot simply add language, because language is only possible on account of *Rede*. Taylor Carman suggests that one solution to this impasse is that *Rede* names the “expressive-communicative dimension of practice, broadly conceived, language being just one of its concrete manifestations.” (2003, 205) On this view, *Rede* accounts for the discursive intelligibility of the social world which explicit linguistic expressions

*sometimes* articulate. Language as such would then be nearly analogous to interpretation, in the sense that it is derivative of *Rede* in much the same way as interpretation is existential understanding made explicit. (1962, 189) The benefit of viewing *Rede* this way is that it enables us to investigate the *possibility* as well as the *consequences* of attempting to transform communicative compartments into explicit expressions. Promoting this transformation is the essence of both Taylor's ethics (i.e. his claims about the value of becoming a strong evaluator) and his normative social theory. But is the range of human communicative experiences coextensive with the range of experiences that can be put into language without distortion?<sup>77</sup>

In a related debate with McDowell, Dreyfus claims that the range of intelligent human coping activities is not coextensive with those actions or experiences that are available to conceptual reflection without distortion. In Heideggerian terms, his claim is that interpretation is derivative of existential understanding and that interpretive activity has the potential to disable ordinary mindless coping skills (i.e. existential understanding). Dreyfus, McDowell and Taylor all agree that ordinary coping is situation-specific and that understanding itself does not amount to rule-following. McDowell, however, believes that ordinary coping is nonetheless "permeated with mindedness," and is, as such, thoroughly rational. His use of the term rationality is idiosyncratic – a point that Dreyfus misses at first – because it is not meant to describe non-situation specific rule-following of the sort Taylor believes the so-called epistemological tradition represents. (2007, "Myth," 339) McDowell believes that distinctively human coping is fundamentally unlike the way that non-human animals cope with the world and that the only way to make sense of this distinction is to say that every bit of human intentional content is suffused with conceptuality. (2007, "Myth," 344) Intentional content need not actually be articulated in

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<sup>77</sup> As will hopefully become clearer shortly, by "distortion," I do not mean to imply that human beings ordinarily have a clear view of the meaning of their social practices that becomes distorted by communicative attention. The standard against which I am considering the possible losses, or distortions, due to communicative or interpretive activity is simply the ordinary coping exhibited by social actors. Distortion, as will become clear, is a pragmatic term, meant to imply the potential ways in which excessive conceptual attention on an activity can disable one's ordinary engagement in that activity, thus distorting the normal phenomenon.

order for human beings to cope intelligently in the world – this is the Heideggerian point on which everyone involved agrees – however, according to McDowell, the process through which that content goes when articulated is like annexing language to already-conceptual content. (2007, “Myth,” 348) Crucially, Taylor assumes this same claim when he argues that interpretations constitutive of practices can be made explicit in language without distortion.

Dreyfus suggests, however, that this view cannot make sense of a vast array of phenomena when consciously attending to the task at hand in our ordinary coping severely limits our ability to perform our tasks with expertise. The experiences Dreyfus has in mind are typically illustrated with athletic examples, although the phenomenon is certainly not limited to sports. Dreyfus’ exemplar is Chuck Knoblauch, the all-star second baseman for the New York Yankees who suddenly lost the ability to throw to first base. Nothing was wrong with Knoblauch’s body, but instead, he seemed to have lost his absorption in everyday coping when, for some reason, he began to think about the mechanics of making the throw. Knoblauch found that he could not think about throwing and throw at the same time. Interestingly, Knoblauch had no problem with hard-hit grounders. But, with a softly hit ball, when he had time to think about the task at hand, he couldn’t make the play. Jim Courier, the former number one ranked tennis player in the world, drew upon the same intuition in an interview, when he said starkly, “the dumber you are on court, the better you’re going to play.”<sup>78</sup> Dreyfus concludes that in the Knoblauch case, and others like it (when, for example, a musician loses her “feel” or an expert chess player ceases to sense the “flow” of the game), to repeat a key quotation, “the enemy of expertise is thought.” Dreyfus argues that Knoblauch’s story bears upon McDowell’s account of conceptuality. If all intentional content is permeated with mindedness, there would be no way to explain the deleterious effects of mindedness to expert coping. While Knoblauch become a “full-time rational animal” with tragic

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<sup>78</sup> Found at [http://thinkexist.com/quotes/jim\\_courier/](http://thinkexist.com/quotes/jim_courier/)

consequences, “happily,” Dreyfus writes, “the rest of us are only part-time rational animals.” (2007, 354)

What McDowell overlooks is the fact that the intentional content of ordinary coping is not simply annexed to language when we interpret it, but is rather, transformed by interpretation. McDowell responds by claiming that the sort of mindedness involved in Knoblauch-like experiences is not the sort of mindedness he has in mind, that the act of over-thinking ordinary coping is more like the version of rationality espoused by the epistemological tradition. Knoblauch fails to successfully perform a “practical concept” according to McDowell. (2007, “Response,” 367) But this response is insufficient. It simply empties the concept of concept of any operative content. If Dreyfus is right that mindedness transforms our otherwise mindless absorbed coping, the only reasonable phenomenologically justified conclusion is that ordinary coping is nonconceptual.

Dreyfus views interpretive activity as a kind of disposition, namely one for which certainly some situations call, but others do not. On the other hand, Taylor seems to view ordinary coping as always already having an interpretive quality, one which it unequivocally benefits human agents to make more explicit. These two views represent competing interpretations of Heidegger’s beliefs which are mirrored in the debate about *Rede*. At issue in that debate is whether or not the process of bringing “discourse” to language marks a meaningful transformation or, rather, simply a change in shape of always already linguistic content. We could make sense of Knoblauch-like phenomena by suggesting that excessive attention transforms ordinary coping skills in much the same way as excessive articulation narrows down the content of what is “sayable” to what is said. Interpretation and language cannot always transform the content of ordinary coping without disabling our ordinary social skills, in other words. If all understanding is conceptual, this transformation ought to be possible without distortion. Similarly, if all discursively articulated communicable experiences are linguistic, then the transformation from what is sayable to what is said also ought to be possible without

distortion. However, if one views practical understanding and articulation (in the sense of jointedness) in the way that Dreyfus does, this transformation appears more complex, often potentially problematic and not necessarily desirable.

The essential point is that how one thinks of the relationship between understanding and interpretation, or the relationship between *Rede* and language, determines how one views the possibility of effecting a transformation from one into the other. And the possibility of making these transformations without distortion bears heavily upon their desirability. Dreyfus turns to Merleau-Ponty's account of "positively indeterminate" perceptual phenomena in order to make sense of this potentially disabling transformation with respect to social actions generally. McDowell and Dreyfus (and presumably Taylor as well) agree that our ordinary coping is largely indeterminate. This fact unites them in opposition to the epistemological tradition. Dreyfus alone seems to believe, however, with Merleau-Ponty, that the indeterminacy of ordinary coping is a *positive* phenomenon, that is, one which requires its own indeterminacy to function normally and which can be ruined by explicit awareness.

Now, the question is: where is Taylor on all of this? Is his view problematic, assuming Dreyfus and the pragmatic view are right? Does he place interpretation in a problematically foundational role, as some commentators, such as James Tully (1989, 192-193) and Michael Martin (1994, 261) seem to think, thus ultimately mistakenly taking hermeneutics to be the sovereign discipline in the human sciences? More centrally to my purposes, does Taylor's view of *Verstehen* social theory mistake the activity of interpretation for ordinary engaged, intelligent, and positively indeterminate, coping? Ultimately, then, is Taylor guilty of committing the scholastic fallacy – despite his clear intentions otherwise – by identifying ordinary social action with the conceptual and reflective dimensions of practice which philosophers and social theorists tend to find most interesting (and most in need of their own areas of expertise)?

There is sufficient evidence in Taylor's writings, I believe, to conclude that his view is problematic on these lights. The foundation of Taylor's corpus is that human beings are self-

interpreting animals, which means, as he says, that interpretation is constitutive of what we are. (1985, *HA*, 47) The very goal of the *Geisteswissenschaften* is to render intersubjective *meanings* explicit.<sup>79</sup> Emotions also seem to be interpretive *and* linguistic all the way down on Taylor's view. Because our emotions are shaped by the way that we interpret the imports of a given situation, and the ways in which we interpret these imports are constituted by intersubjective meanings, it follows to say that language shapes our emotions. (1985, *HA*, 72) Taylor asks us to consider the difference between anger and indignation, for example. The latter is a characteristically human experience, involving a strong evaluation and an ascription of the concept of injustice to a situation. (1985, *HA*, 261-262) "Pure," nonlinguistic, nonconceptual anger, while perhaps conceivable for human beings, is not among our ordinary possibilities.

Carman argues that Taylor's expressivist view of language actually amounts to what Heidegger means by *Rede* (notwithstanding the fact that Taylor uses the word language itself). But this view is mistaken. Taylor's example about riding on a hot train and turning to one's neighbor to say, "whew, it's hot" does not amount to an assertoric statement like "it is hot" or "I feel hot," Carman claims, correctly. This statement is an example, instead, of an expressivist gesture meant to constitute a common experience. Thus, Carman believes, again correctly, that "although Taylor does not say so, the meaning of my gesture is strictly indeterminate, not just ambiguous, with respect to those two propositions." (2003, 239) However, a gesture of this sort may be *positively* indeterminate, meaning that its coherence relies upon the maintenance of its own indeterminacy as an expressive act. Taylor never says, nor would he say, that in articulating the meaning of a common experience like this, we very well may undermine the experience. (And following the example, this seems to be so: if I turn to my neighbor and say, "whew, it's hot, and by that I mean to create rapport between us," I suspect that my efforts would fail.)

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<sup>79</sup> Taylor's *Verstehen* thesis is quite close to Gadamer's hermeneutics for this reason. Gadamer too takes practical understanding to be conceptual and linguistic in problematic ways. "The question that concerns us," he writes in *Truth and Method*, for example, "is *the conceptual character* of all understanding." (2000, 403)

Indeed, quite to the contrary, Taylor thinks we *ought* to bring common experiences to explicit awareness. This is the very project of the *Verstehen* thesis and the ethics of authenticity. As such, Taylor cannot mean by language what the pragmatic interpreters take Heidegger to mean by *Rede*.

At times, Taylor seems to undermine his own support for the claim that ordinary coping skills are largely indeterminate. His view, as a result, sometimes seems close to McDowell's. Taylor claims that, though we needn't articulate our interpretive ascription of a situation in order to act in socially sanctioned ways, having an experience means being struck by the situation that that articulation *would* describe. (1985, *HA*, 100) This claim seems to deny the possibility of nonconceptual coping and suggests instead that we can simply annex the content of our experiences to language without losing anything in the process. On a related note, Taylor writes, "it is certainly not the case that all patterns *issue* from conscious action, but all patterns have to be made *intelligible* in relation to conscious action." (1985, *HS*, 171)

Other times, Taylor does in fact insist upon the indeterminacy of ordinary coping and ends up sounding different than McDowell. Taylor discusses the idea that conceptual attention transforms ordinary experiences. Rendering a feeling explicit, for example, changes the content of that feeling, Taylor claims; when I understand my feelings, they change. (1985, *HA*, 63) New modes of expression enable new feelings, and Taylor says quite explicitly, on a related point, that when we give our experiences a reflective dimension, we transform them. (1985, *HA*, 233) However, Taylor's recognition of the fact that explicitness transforms the content of ordinary indeterminate coping does not mean that he accepts or recognizes the *positivity* of indeterminate ordinary coping. Taylor's normative ideal in both his theory of agency and his conception of the *Geisteswissenschaften* indicates that he thinks this transformation is always desirable. On the point about individual agency, this is what Taylor means when he argues that we ought to try to become "strong evaluators." Individuals unequivocally flourish, Taylor believes, when they find ways to articulate and rank the worth of their desires. Crucially, I have found *no* instances where

Taylor speaks negatively or even cautiously about the consequences of transforming ordinary coping into explicit awareness.

There is good reason, I believe, to think that ordinary coping does in fact often depend upon its own indeterminacy. For example, recent studies of cognitive capacities seem to support Dreyfus' claim and help to make sense of positively indeterminate phenomena as well. Researchers recently have found, for example, that snap decisions about how "competent" a politician looks, based on photographs of faces presented to subjects for 100 milliseconds, are far better predictors of eventual electoral outcomes than considerations made after subjects are allowed to study the photographs. (Ballew and Todorov, 2007) The suggestion of this study is not that political judgment, in the sense of what is good for a polity, improves when people don't spend time thinking about their decisions. Rather, it is that our ability to recognize cultural conceptions of "political competence" improves the less time we have to think. The skill to pick out likely electoral winners is undermined by explicit thought, in other words. So Dreyfus' argument about nonconceptual coping does not apply only to embodied activities like athletics, but also to all kinds of ordinary skillful comportments.

More broadly, the nature of Knoblauch-like phenomena and snap judgments indicates that "optimal experiences," in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's term, are often tied to our most mindless activities. Csikszentmihalyi's psychology of optimal experiences in his book *Flow* comes to an opposite conclusion to Taylor regarding the sources of personal fulfillment. Where Taylor focuses on strong evaluations and ranking the worth of one's desires, Csikszentmihalyi focuses on self-forgetful involvement in one's tasks. Csikszentmihalyi asked subjects to wear an electronic paging device and to record how they felt and what they were thinking whenever the pager signaled. The pager was activated about eight times a day at random intervals. Csikszentmihalyi's psychological account of "flow" experiences is the result of this research. It is part descriptive psychology, part self-help. The conclusion of Csikszentmihalyi's study is that subjects report being most fulfilled when their concentration is so intense that self-consciousness



disappears, their sense of time becomes distorted and their experiences take on an “autotelic” quality (i.e. their actions are ends in themselves). (1990, 71) In the phenomenology of personal fulfillment, the positive indeterminacy of flow experiences attests to the problematic nature of Taylor’s general normative orientation.

In an essay dedicated to Frankfurt’s claims about the conditions of agency, David Velleman discusses Csikszentmihalyi’s study and also suggests that the perspective of the subject who is engaged in her activities is positively indeterminate with respect to higher-order reflections. Of course, positive indeterminacy is not Velleman’s term. But his suggestion that one cannot simultaneously experience thirst, for example, and simultaneously reflect upon that experience effectively means that first-order experiences like being thirsty are positively indeterminate. Velleman offers several convincing reasons why becoming reflectively aware of one’s thirst tends to make one less engrossed in being thirsty:

Attentively reflecting on one’s thirst entails standing back from it, for several reasons. First, the content of one’s reflective thoughts is not especially expressive of the motive of which one is reflecting: “I am thirsty” is not an especially thirsty thought, not necessarily the thought of someone *thinking thirstily*. Second, attentive reflection is itself an activity – a mental activity – and as such it requires a motive, which of course is not thirst. Reflecting on one’s thirst is therefore a distraction from acting on one’s thirst, and in that respect it is even a distraction from *being* thirsty. Most importantly, though, consciousness just seems to open a gulf between subject and object, even when its object is the subject himself. Consciousness seems to have the structure of vision, requiring its object to stand across from the viewer – to occupy the position of *Gegenstand*. (2007, 16)

Velleman goes on to suggest that a unique condition of human agency is the need to overcome the distancing effect of reflective consciousness. (2007, 18) He then suggests that achieving self-forgetful engaged states, like those described by Csikszentmihalyi, is an essential step in the process of becoming a fully human agent. Velleman’s goal is to reconcile Frankfurt’s fears of the “wanton” person (the one who, lacking higher-order self-evaluations, is a “helpless bystander” to her desires) with Csikszentmihalyi’s account of optimal experiences. To do so, he puts forward the notion of “higher wantonness.” What’s important is the fact that Velleman sees a need to pull

off this reconciliation, more than whether or not the Taoist-inspired “higher wantonness” does so. The need to save second-order reflections as one of the conditions of human agency is motivated by Velleman’s recognition of something akin to positively indeterminate phenomena.

In his book *Sour Grapes*, Elster’s analysis of “states that are essentially by-products” attests, in a different way, to the positivity of indeterminate phenomena.<sup>80</sup> Elster is out to disprove some of the founding claims of rational action theories by showing that many ordinary desirable states, such as being asleep, “acting natural,” or forgetting, cannot, on pain of defeating one’s own intentions, be achieved by attempts to bring them about. States that cannot be commanded, but can only arise spontaneously, are also positively indeterminate. Consider this impossible command a parent may give to his or her child: “remember that you must not even think about this forbidden thing.” (1985, 60) Elster labels the failure to recognize the difference between desirable states and states that are recalcitrant to deliberate action, “the moral fallacy of by-products.” (1985, 43) These states are similar to social actions that require their own opacity in order to function normally. The question at hand is whether Taylor’s *Verstehen* thesis is guilty of something like a moral fallacy of by-products.

So too does Williams’ critique of the logic of having “one thought too many” speak to the positivity of indeterminate phenomena. While Williams is concerned with the idea that moral actions are always in need of justification (whether Kantian or utilitarian), his claim parallels my own inasmuch as the undesirable consequences of having one thought too many serve as a caution against the unequivocal ideal of higher-order reflection. First, Williams appreciates the sheer fact of indeterminacy in ordinary social life. When arguing against the idea that “absolute conceptions” are valuable in ethics, he writes:

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<sup>80</sup> See Chapter Two for a more detailed account of Elster’s argument in *Sour Grapes*. Although I am strongly critical of Elster there, I believe that he does describe useful and rich phenomenological evidence about positively indeterminate phenomena via his account of states that are essentially by-products.

It is one aspiration, that social and ethical relations should not essentially rest on ignorance and misunderstanding of what they are, and quite another that all the beliefs and principles involved in them should be explicitly stated. That these are two different things is obvious with personal relations, where to hope that they do not rest on deceit and error is merely decent, but to think that their basis can be made totally explicit is idiocy. (1985, 102)

What's more, Williams seems to appreciate something analogous to *positively* indeterminate social phenomena. To explain the idea of having one thought too many, he draws a distinction between two potentially motivating notions: a man may save his wife from immanent danger simply because it's his wife, or he may be said to save his wife because this is his wife and in situations of this kind it's permissible to save one's wife. (1981, 18) Williams' intuition about the latter motivation is that it contains one thought too many. It adds a maxim to an action that is intelligent and coherent without one. Williams therefore not only shares the intuition that there is an important difference between intelligent action and action guided by an ideal or a higher-order reflection, but he also recognizes how adding the latter to the former can distort and undermine our ordinary skills. The man who pauses to reflect on the reasons for saving his wife *is worse off*. Of ethics, Williams writes:

If we accept that there can be knowledge at the hypertraditional or unreflective level; if we accept the obvious truth that reflection characteristically disturbs, unseats, or replaces those traditional concepts; and if we agree that, at least as things are, the reflective level is not in a position to give us knowledge we did not have before – then we reach the notably un-Socratic conclusion that, in ethics, *reflection can destroy knowledge*. (1985, 148)

Finally, Bourdieu's conception of *illusio* (described in greater detail in Chapter Three) represents perhaps the clearest articulation of the concept of positively indeterminate phenomena. *Illusio* demonstrates an important distinction between the account of practical sense I endorse and Taylor's linguistic account of ordinary coping. For while Taylor speaks of ideals, interpretations, and meanings, Bourdieu speaks of stakes, and to have a stake in a social practice, according to Bourdieu, often requires a whole-hearted commitment to that practice that by definition does not

recognize itself as a commitment. “It is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know,” he writes. (1990, *Logic*, 69) *Illusio* is inherent in membership to a social field. It shows how opacity is a positive element of engaged social practice. (2000, 11) Based on a Heideggerian sense of practical understanding, *illusio* is fundamentally different, Bourdieu argues, from an act of interpretation, the paradigm of which he (and Taylor, we should note) takes to be the translation of foreign texts and cultures. (2000, 53)

*Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu’s book about the *skholé*, or scholastic attitude, describes *illusio* at work in academia, where success requires being blind to having an interest in success. (2000, 37) So too does the logic of gift-exchange require *illusio*, inasmuch as gift-giving is a practice the success of which requires that everyone deny what they understand to be its logic. Gift-giving is meant to create trust, Bourdieu believes. However, it is also an economic exchange, and the possibility of creating trust requires the denial of our awareness of the economic exchange. “Gift exchange,” he writes, “is one of the social games that cannot be played unless the players refuse to acknowledge the objective truth of the game, the very truth that objective analysis brings to light . . .” (1990, *Logic*, 105) The logic of gift exchange expresses the ubiquitous and mundane presence of *illusio* in ordinary social practices. In each case, the lesson (which Taylor seems not to see) is that “there is every reason to think that as soon as he reflects on his practice, adopting a quasi-theoretical posture, the agent loses any chance of expressing the truth of his practice.” (Bourdieu, 1990, *Logic*, 91)

Taylor and Bourdieu agree that practical understanding is a necessarily embodied capacity and is therefore not well described as a mental process. The stakes of a game, in Bourdieu’s language, are not about theses or principles, but rather represent modes of action, routines and things to be done. *Illusio* is a “visceral commitment,” according to Bourdieu. (2000, 102) It functions against the background of the *habitus*, or bodily dispositions to act in ways

guided by the normativity of the social world.<sup>81</sup> Taylor would agree with much of this, for he too believes that the social world is “in” the body. His rejection of the epistemological tradition leads him to a Merleau-Pontian view of embodiment which does not seem largely at odds with Bourdieu’s. Taylor might also agree with Bourdieu when Bourdieu writes, “the most serious social injunctions are addressed not to the intellect but to the body, treated as a memory pad.” (2000, 141)

But the difference between these thinkers has to do with how and when human beings ought to thematize and make explicit this “address.” Bourdieu is certainly worried about the legitimation of unjust practices consequent from the naturalizing effects of *illusio*,<sup>82</sup> just as Taylor is worried about the atomism and individualism that are consequences of a society that has lost touch with its motivating ideals. In some cases then, maximizing the clarity of our normally indeterminate understanding is undoubtedly of great value. This is especially true when the ostensible naturalness of an unjust established order can be undermined. But surely the goal of social theory is not to undermine or unsettle *all* of our social practices. Of course, Taylor would not think so either, but his account of language, agency and social theory offers no discernible way to distinguish desirable process of articulation from undesirable ones. Taylor does not discuss practices like gift-giving and the *skholé*, or Knoblauch-like experiences, all of which exhibit the positivity of indeterminate coping and are quite suffused throughout ordinary life.

Taylor’s position too readily identifies what Heidegger calls understanding and what Bourdieu calls practical sense with something like tacit knowledge. His focus on language and interpretation belies this point. And of the interpretive or hermeneutic social theory that results, Bourdieu, quite correctly, I think, writes:

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<sup>81</sup> See Chapter Three for an account of Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*.

<sup>82</sup> “The work of the legitimation of the established order is extraordinarily facilitated by the fact that it goes on almost automatically in the reality of the social world.” (2000, 181)

. . . the ‘thinker’ betrays his secret conviction that action is fully performed only when it is understood, interpreted, expressed, by identifying the implicit with the unthought and by denying the status of authentic thought to the tacit and practical thought that is inherent in all ‘sensible’ action. Language spontaneously becomes the accomplice of this hermeneutic philosophy which leads one to conceive action as something to be deciphered, when it leads one to say, for example, that a gesture or ritual act *expresses* something, rather than saying, quite simply, that it is ‘sensible’ (*sensé*) or, as in English, that it ‘makes’ sense. (1990, *Logic*, 37)

If the concerns about the practical effects of over-interpretation articulated by Dreyfus, Bourdieu, Elster and Williams are correct, then we ought to be concerned about the practical effects of Taylor’s normative theory. I would like now, in conclusion, to consider some of these potential effects in more detail.

#### *On the Gains and Loses of Interpretation*

Positively indeterminate phenomena are those that require the maintenance of their own opacity in order to function normally. This sense of opacity is distinct from three others. It does not mean that positively indeterminate phenomena are simply random, unintelligible or unstructured, like the pattern of people walking down a street at a given point in time. Nor does it mean that the clarity of some given phenomenon is structurally blocked by repressive forces born in some sense outside the “lifeworld,” in the Frankfurt School critical theorist’s sense. Lastly, positively indeterminate phenomena are different from those practical experiences depicted by Taylor, who recognizes that social phenomena operate largely “behind our backs,” but who also believes that it is virtually always in our interest to face up to them reflectively.

My claim, to the contrary, is that *some* social phenomena can and ought to be disambiguated, but not without an awareness of the potentially disabling consequences of this transformation. Dreyfus argues that one of the central tasks of philosophy ought to be the study of this transformation, of the largely self-sufficient “ground-floor level of everyday coping” into

the “upper floors” of higher-level awareness. (2005, 48) Studying this transformation means attending to what might be gained in the process but also to what might be lost.

In service of his argument that theory is a kind of practice, Taylor refers to maps as a good metaphor for the pragmatic nature of social theory: “the map becomes useless, indeed ceases to be a map in any meaningful sense for me, unless I can use it to help me get around,” he writes. (2005, 37) Maps are indeed a useful metaphor, contra Taylor’s intention, however, because the very essence of a map is to exclude some features of a given terrain in order to highlight others. Maps are, in other words, in some sense, positively indeterminate. The history of global map projections is the history of comparative losses and gains. Depending on what one wants to accomplish, she should choose a map that accurately represents proportion at the expense of relative distance or tactile accuracy at the expense of size, etc.<sup>83</sup> As Howard Veregin, director of geographic information systems at Rand McNally, puts it: “maps lie on purpose in order to tell the truth.” (quoted by Weinberger, 2007, 156) The way in which maps narrow down the content of ordinary space describes a process similar to the one Heidegger describes in reference to interpretation, which also narrows down content, taking “the first cut” out of ordinary understanding. (1962, 196-197)

Considering whether we *can* transform ordinary coping into explicit awareness in language ought to shape our sense of which practices and experiences *ought* to be made explicit. Taylor uses another example that I believe undermines his point. In talking about love, he claims that when we disambiguate our feelings for another, and realize why we love them, we will have inevitably gained. (1985, *HA*, 70) But is this patently so? Aren’t some experiences – like love – characterized by the fact that we *cannot* articulate them? Love is what it is, and presumably it holds sway in our cultural imagination, precisely because it is so recalcitrant to thought. Taylor would likely grant this last point – he appropriates Williams’ argument against “absolute

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<sup>83</sup> “Selective emphasis,” Dewey writes, “with accompanying omission and rejection, is the heart-beat of mental life.” (1973, 268)

understanding” in ethics in order to suggest that human beings can never achieve a complete understanding of themselves or their practices (1985, *HS*, 3) – but he would nonetheless consider such articulate understanding always a worthy, or even *the* most worthy, goal. But this seems to be something like a category mistake. Love simply becomes something else when we analyze, articulate or reflect upon it. We may do so in retrospect, and risk the pitfalls of creative remembering, or we may do so in the moment, and risk disabling the moment of love. This is not to say, of course, that reflecting upon the meaning of love isn’t valuable, but just that doing so entails gains *and* losses.

Taylor’s focus on the importance of critical debate in the public sphere also illustrates the limitations of his normative project. The essence of Taylor’s normative view consists of the process of uncovering and clarifying our motivating ideals, and holding our practices up against them. The ethics of authenticity, for example, is about the tension embodied in an ideal to which our culture does not live up fully. (1991, 72) This view leads naturally enough to Taylor’s frequent insistence that we, as a culture, spend more time engaged in critical debate. The communitarian project, which Taylor supports, seems to be an extension of this call for interpretive debate about the capacities our culture ought to respect and then codify in formal legal rights. MacIntyre, in much the same vein, argues that the proper antidote to cultural “fragmentation” is the recovery, through interpretive debate, of socially constituted virtues and “meanings.”<sup>84</sup> (1984, 204) Taylor is also aware that the struggle to recover our motivating ideals is “many-leveled,” meaning that theoretical debates must link up with local institutional debates (e.g. those that take place in hospitals and schools), spiritual debates, and political debates. (1991, 120)

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<sup>84</sup> MacIntyre’s view is arguably more problematic than Taylor’s, inasmuch as he focuses the whole of ethics and moral theory on the search for and deliberate choice of the best ethical maxim. For example, he writes, “In practical *reasoning* the possession [of an adequate sense of the tradition to which one belongs] . . . appears in the kind of capacity for *judgment* which the agent possesses in knowing how to select among the relevant stack of *maxims* and how to *apply them* in particular situations.” (cited in Varela, 1999, 23) As Varela points out, this view of normative theory easily leads to the kind of information-processing jargon that an account of intelligent coping is meant to displace. (1999, 24)



These kinds of interpretative, reflective debates embody Taylor's conception of freedom, and regarding some of the examples he cites (e.g. debates about rights or political institutions), his project is surely the right one. But it is not self-evident that spiritual commitments, for example, are matters for debate, though perhaps this case could be made. More generally, philosophical consideration ought to be given to investigating which practices are matters for debate and which practices may be problematically undermined by debate. Taylor seems to assume that by showing how language makes insight possible (1985, *HA*, 71), he has made the case for articulating the content of all experiences and practices in language. Insight drives theory and debate, but it does not drive all practices.

Contesting the idea that we always ought to maximize the conceptual clarity of our practices and experiences does not amount to obscurantism, as Isaiah Berlin suggests. Berlin follows an otherwise elucidating description of *phronesis* in political judgment with the hedging claim that, "of course, whatever can be isolated, looked at, inspected, should be." (1996, para. 22). Berlin should have added, "'whatever can be isolated, looked at, inspected' . . . without distortion or without disabling the practice itself." To suggest that we ought to not *always* endeavor to maximize the transparency of our practices means two central things, neither of which are obscurantist: first, it means attending to the situation-specific consequences, particularly the possibility of undermining our success as social actors, when we attempt to make our ordinary coping explicit; second, it means considering the possibility that a normative injunction to pursue the path of maximal conceptual clarity is itself potentially an expression of personal or cultural prejudice.<sup>85</sup> Michael Shapiro suggests as much about Taylor, arguing that his account of strong evaluation ultimately judges *de facto* preferences as unworthy of human agents,

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<sup>85</sup> Alternately, and perhaps more convincingly, instead of personal or cultural prejudice, one could interpret the injunction to pursue the path of maximal conceptual clarity as a reflection of *social* prejudice. What I mean is that Taylor's steady focus on increasing the clarity of our social practices may be a prejudice stemming from the social position of a professional intellectual. I will discuss this idea more below. On this point, also, see Chapter Three on Bourdieu's argument about the social conditions of rationality, as well as Chapter Five regarding his concept of self-reflexivity.

a claim that stems not from any conceptual point about human agency as such, but rather, from an idiosyncratic moral tradition with deep roots in Kantian ethics and Christian self-denial. (1986, 315)

While Taylor's is an admirable goal with respect to many social and personal practices, a very serious consequence of its blindness to the positivity of indeterminate phenomena is that it has the potential to deny social theory one of its most important resources: the capacity to learn from ways of being in the world that are meaningfully unlike its own. To his credit, Taylor is sensitive to this notion. His model of finding a "language of perspicacious contrast," (1981, 205) modeled on the Gadamerian "fusion of horizons," is meant to show how foundational Western values, such as our faith in the natural sciences, can be compared with non-Western, "non-scientific" cultures, in non-relativistic ways. However, Taylor seems to waver regarding the consequences of this claim. Happily, for example, he rejects the idea that belief in magical practices in "primitive societies" ought to be understood as either a form of proto-science or as a symbolic activity with no implicit claims to realism. Thinking that social practices have to be one or the other – proto-science or merely symbolic – is a signal feature of Western civilization, Taylor notes. (1981, 208) But because his somewhat idiosyncratic claim to social realism is founded on the argument that "plurality does not rule out judgments of superiority," in his tellingly titled essay "Rationality," Taylor argues that the successes "scored" by "theoretical cultures" must "command the attention" of "atheoretical cultures." "A case in point is the immense technological successes of one particular theoretical culture," he writes, namely, "our scientific one." (1985, *HS*, 150) Though this is itself perhaps a contestable claim (or at the least, a far more complex claim than Taylor acknowledges), I can grant it, noting only that Taylor's focus on rationality and its successes obscures, or at least ignores, the ways in which social practices foreign to Westerners ought to command *our* attention. Taylor's essay concludes by making the point that rationality is an instance of "the human activity of articulation," an activity

that is presumably common to all cultures. (1985, *HS*, 151) It is precisely this assumption that Taylor does not submit to a comparative language of perspicacious contrast.

This worry is reminiscent of Kwame Anthony Appiah's critique of Taylor's multiculturalism. Taylor does well to connect his account of intersubjective meanings to "social scripts," Appiah believes, which are often problematically opaque in European and American culture. But Taylor is too comfortable with the given constitution of social scripts. As such, he calls for a politics that recognizes the importance of reconstituting identities. (1994, 162) Though the politics of recognition opens a host of questions orthogonal to my argument, the point to take is that learning from new social scripts and new social practices is not only a matter of articulating our given cultural interpretations in language. It is also a matter of finding ways to allow those scripts and practices to reshape our interpretations and our language.

Doing so entails recognizing that ordinary social actions and practices do not necessarily require conceptual articulation in order to be coherent and intelligent. To think otherwise broadly represents the sort of intellectualism against which I have been arguing throughout this dissertation. The existence of positively indeterminate social phenomena suggests that a normative account of social action can become ineffective if it fails to recognize that ordinary social actions and practices are intelligent in a non-mentalistic way. I have tried to show why I believe that Taylor's *Verstehen* thesis becomes ineffective in this way.

Two conclusions, finally, seem possible. The first, and weaker, conclusion is internal to Taylor's account, whereas the second speaks to my ongoing concern about normative accounts of social action in general. The weaker conclusion is that Taylor considers the preponderance of positively indeterminate experiences in ordinary life to be rather low. On this reading, there is no structural reason internal to Taylor's account of agency and social theory preventing him from granting the possibility that explicit articulation has the potential to disable one's success as a social actor. Instead, Taylor simply find those phenomena where this is not the case – that is,

where we can and indeed ought to work toward maximal clarity – more compelling, more common, or more worthy of attention.

If Taylor's error is a matter of misjudging the proportion of positively indeterminate experiences to those that are available to reflection without distortion, this may be because he too easily distinguishes between "mindedness," in the sense he attributes to the epistemological tradition, and "mindfulness," in the normative sense of gaining reflective awareness. Taylor rejects one central aspect of the Enlightenment tradition – its epistemology – but retains another – its faith in the value of explicit reflection. But mindedness and mindfulness are not so easily cleaved, and Taylor's normative intention to articulate the value of the latter without reverting to an epistemological account of human beings as "knowers" requires him to depict ordinary coping as simply available for explicit articulation in language without distortion.

The stronger conclusion is that Taylor's *Verstehen* thesis is, despite itself, representative of intellectualist social theory. Beyond a matter of preponderance or proportion, Taylor's account of interpretation may be an instance of problematically considering the skills needed for ordinary coping to be a species of (poorly worked out) theoretical reflection. Put crudely, Taylor's optimistic attitude toward mindfulness depicts human flourishing in ways that make successful agency simply look like the activity of philosophers. If true, this conclusion demonstrates an element of blindness to the intelligence of ordinary social actions and practices. This blindness in turn means that a normative account of social action like Taylor's cannot learn from those actions and practices. The task of the next two chapters is to show, both negatively and positively, what this process of learning from intelligent actions and practices might mean.

There is textual evidence, I believe, to support the fear that Taylor's *Verstehen* thesis edges uncomfortably close to intellectualism. Taylor is too willing to draw analogies between the business of philosophy – which he says is to strive for conceptual clarity and innovation – and the practice of interpretation, the practice he believes we all ought to engage in order to become full, flourishing human beings. (1985, *HA*, 41) In doing so, Taylor projects the philosopher's attitude

onto human experiences as such, thereby making them look impoverished by comparison. If this charge is right, *Verstehen* social theory seems to fail on its own lights, becoming what it set out to avoid. It edges uncomfortably close to something like what Merleau-Ponty calls “reflective philosophy,” the mistake of which “is to believe that the thinking subject can absorb into its thinking or appropriate without remainder the object of its thought, that our being can be brought down to our knowledge.” (2002, 72)

Bourdieu worries about this conflation of the philosophical attitude with ordinary coping because it deprives people without access to philosophical resources the possibility of living a fully flourishing human life. He believes this conflation results from a “fundamental ambiguity” inherent in the scholastic enterprise, namely, that the freedom to contemplate granted to intellectuals also disconnects them from the world. (2000, 15) It is clear, I believe, that Bourdieu does not have a thinker like Taylor in mind here. He is speaking of the same intellectualist tradition against which Taylor constructs his view. But while Taylor and Bourdieu are equally suspicious of over-applying the concept of mindedness to ordinary coping, the issue Bourdieu articulates *does* distinguish his view from Taylor’s friendly evaluation of *mindfulness*. Certainly Taylor does not think of himself as a scientist in the ordinary sense, but I believe that the following point Bourdieu makes is nonetheless apropos of the *Verstehen* thesis.

Ignoring everything that is implicated in the ‘scholastic point of view’ leads us to commit the most serious epistemological mistake in the social sciences, namely, that which consists in putting ‘a scholar inside the machine,’ in picturing all social agents in the image of the scientist (of the scientist’s reasoning on human practice and not of the acting scientist, the scientist-in-action) or, more precisely, to place the models that the scientists must construct to account for practices in the consciousness of agents, to do as if the constructions that the scientist must produce to understand practices, to account for them, were the main determinants, the actual cause of the practices. (1992, 70)

Dreyfus and Williams emphasize similar conflations of mindfulness and mindedness. About being mindful, Dreyfus writes, “of course there will always be problems and opportunities that require reflection and, as already noted, attention has its advantages for learning, problem

solving, coaching, explaining, criticizing, etc. But we should be careful not to take the crucial importance of attention and rational reflection in our lives as an argument that we are animals whose essential feature is our capacity to be mindful.” (2007, 363) And on a related theme, Williams asks, “must any philosophical inquiry into the ethical and into the good life require the value of philosophy itself and of a reflective intellectual stance to be part of the answer?” (1985, 21) The purport of my argument is that Williams’ question applies equally as well to *Verstehen* social theory as it does to ethics.

If, as Wittgenstein holds, “philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language,” (2001, 40) then those philosophers interested in measuring the worth of their theories by the quality of the practices they inform must recognize that Wittgenstein’s battle can be fought, not only over language understood as a way of knowing about the world, but also over language understood as a way of inevitably improving our success in the world as social actors. Inspired by Wittgenstein, Taylor does well to take the philosophical tradition’s enthrallment with the epistemological tradition’s conception of pervasively minded agents to task. But he fails to extend the same critical insight to the tradition’s enthrallment with the idea that human beings can and always ought to be pervasively mindful agents. *Verstehen* social theory would do well to remember William James’ observation, that “there is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work, are subjects of express volitional deliberation.” (1961, 156) It can only be understood as a failure of Taylor’s project on his own lights if *Verstehen* social theory succumbs to a picture of human life that James might in his sense consider miserable.

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The final two chapters of this dissertation inch their way toward statements about the ramifications of my arguments in applied fields of social practice. In the next chapter, I will apply many of these same concerns to the relationship between normative legal theory and legal practice. My purpose will be to show that the former has an indeterminate relationship with the latter, due to the practical understanding of legal practitioners. It is unclear, in other words, how legal theory affects and improves legal practice, a task which is its admitted goal. I will argue that to do so, legal theory must not let its operative concepts become detached from the intelligence embodied in ordinary legal practices. Utilizing Bourdieu's concept of self-reflexivity, I will argue that a necessary component of the task of reformulating our explanatory and normative concepts in the face of intelligent social actions and practices is the study of the social position – or social field – to which those concepts are attuned.

In the final chapter of the dissertation, then, I will continue to explore the relationship between effective normative theories and intelligent social practices, but with respect to newly emerging online social practices. I will evaluate central examples of the burgeoning literature seeking to both explain and guide online social practices, and I will ask whether or not, or in what ways, these new practices demand reformulations of our explanatory and normative concepts. Because new social practices are distinctively unpredictable, it is especially incumbent upon philosophers to remain open to the ways that they may challenge our assumptions. One way online social practices may do so is by creating deep changes to our conceptions of the public sphere, conceptions that play a central role in Taylor's view of critical debate. Following Habermas, Taylor takes the public sphere to be a plurality of public spaces emerging from reflection and discussion and capable of producing common understanding and consensuses (which are more than just convergences of opinion). (1995, 260-263) Taylor's concern for the health of our contemporary public sphere follows a Tocquevillian notion, that people are becoming increasingly less capable of forming a common purpose and carrying it out. (1991, 112) Online social practices present an interesting challenge to Taylor's view because they may

represent models of creating common purpose that have very little to do with the recovery through debate of commonly held motivating ideals.



## Effective Normative Theories

Theorists are like physicians who wish for a longer stethoscope to avoid the odors of their dying patients.

-- Christopher Robinson,  
"How to do Things with  
Wittgenstein"

My claim in the previous chapter was that *Verstehen* social theory returns mixed results on its own pragmatic lights, due to its failure to understand a key feature of intelligent social action, namely, its positive indeterminacy. *Verstehen* social theory may not always improve the practices whose improvement is the measure of its own success, in other words. What's centrally unsatisfying about Taylor's account is its depiction of the normative relationship between social theories and social practices which follows from its interpretive conception of social action. Taylor views the nature of the relationship between theory and practice solely in terms of maximizing the transparency of social actions and practices. In doing so, his view disregards the potentially deleterious effects of "making it explicit" with respect to those actions and practices. In this chapter, I put forward a different account of the affective relationship of theory to practice.

I will focus upon normative accounts of social action and their ability to achieve their pragmatic ends. By normative accounts of social action, I mean prescriptive theoretical accounts of individual action in social contexts or of collective action broadly understood. These are formal and reflective higher-order accounts of social action which intentionally aspire to affect their subject matter. Political philosophy, for example, is a subset of normative social theory on

my reading. Political philosophy aspires to affect formal social bodies such as governments, corporations and firms, which represent collective action in one general form. It aspires to affect these kinds of practices in a number of different ways, by making policy prescriptions, for example, or by interpreting the values which underlie given policies, as in Taylor's view.

The affective relationship of normative theories to practices is too often conceived in the terms set by the study of formal social organizations, however. Theories of practical reason, for example, frequently use the decision-making processes of firms as a model for the intentional action of ordinary social actors. Common models used for these accounts of social action, which are often normative, in addition to firms, are legislatures in the act of drafting laws and academic departments attempting to make a hire. But all of these bodies are unlike ordinary social actors and ordinary forms of collective action in a number of important ways. For one, they have explicit mechanisms – penalties and incentives – which concretize the link between normative principles and institutional operations. More broadly, formal institutions *have* normative principles which presumably guide their actions (e.g. *Robert's Rules of Order*). It is not at all clear that individual social action or ordinary social practices are guided by normative *principles* at all. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, ordinary social action may be normative – that is, intentional in the broad, non-mentalistic sense – without having any principles which act as maxims for action. This is why the idea of rule-following is unsatisfying as a general explanatory model of ordinary social action.

While a normative account of the activity of a firm or a legislature may happily result in policy prescriptions for those formal bodies, such an approach becomes far less satisfying when applied to the broader class of ordinary social actors when acting individually or in concert. I refer here to the large class of mundane social activities which have been under discussion throughout this dissertation, namely, actions and practices which are intelligent but not necessarily intentional in the mentalistic sense. I refer in particular to those ordinary actions and practices which have significant ramifications for political life but are not formally a part of

governments, firms or organized bodies. I am talking, to borrow a phrase from the title of Michel de Certeau's book, about the practices of everyday life, and I am interested in what normative theorists have to say about it. How can normative theory affect actions which are motivated by perceptions of identity, for example, which may amount to a general sense that "we are the kinds of people who do X?"<sup>86</sup> How can normative theories affect actions motivated by tastes, dispositions and other sub-intentional sources of values, beliefs and desires? To name only a few examples, these questions would apply to cultural phenomena (e.g. the popularity of reality television), social norms (e.g. fashion) and informal political practices (e.g. voting patterns) alike.

In fact, the far smaller class of social action is comprised by formal organizations. I intend to leave the question of their relationship to higher-order normative theories aside in order to focus on the relationship between normative theories and ordinary social actions and practices.<sup>87</sup> Because formal institutions are only a subset of the broader class of social actions under consideration here, the making of policy prescriptions ought not to be the dominant formulation of the general affective relationship of social theories to social actions and practices. Neither should deliberative models of collective decision-making, like those which may be useful for legislatures, be assumed to be good general models for normative social theory. In order to understand how social theories can affect the actions and practices of ordinary social actors, a more satisfying approach is needed.

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<sup>86</sup> Notice that I say "*perceptions* of identity" rather than *conceptions* of identity. I do so to underscore the point that I am discussing nonconceptual motivations of action. It is also worth noting that my account, in another context, could lend itself to a richer conception of the "politics of identity." In short, identifying oneself with others – racially, culturally, politically or otherwise – is, in my opinion, a matter of doing what others do and perceiving what others perceive. It is not a matter of having shared *criteria* or shared *reasons* for considering oneself Jewish, salt of the earth, or Libertarian. En route to making his important argument that identity does in fact and ought to motivate some part of political praxis, Appiah, for example, fails to see this point. Cf Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>87</sup> I would suggest that the formal procedures of firms, organizations, legislatures, etc are parasitic upon the practical understanding of their members. Nevertheless, there is obviously important work for political philosophy to do with respect to those formal procedures which govern this class of social practice. That widespread *support* for a certain government policy is motivated by the practical sense of a group of citizens is no reason to think that the evaluation of that policy, its strictures and applications, nor its implementation, have much to do with sub-intentional sources of social action.

The question facing this chapter is how social theories which intend to affect these kinds of ordinary actions and practices can successfully do so. How can social theories effectuate their normative claims when no obvious mechanisms for the implementation of normative principles exist, as they do for formal social organizations? This chapter consists in three central claims. Each utilizes an account of the practical understanding of ordinary social actors in order to better understand the normative relationship between theory and practice. I will argue that:

- (1) The affective relationship between normative social theories and ordinary social actions and practices faces a central problem of *detachment*, and that
- (2) an important way normative social theories can overcome the problem of detachment is by the *reformulation of their operative concepts*, but that
- (3) concept-revision also requires *self-reflexivity* in social theory.

First, I articulate the problem as I see it facing normative accounts of social action which attempt to guide ordinary practical action. I use a case study to make this claim: the difficult relationship of normative legal theories to actual practices of legal adjudication. I discuss arguments made by the legal realists in order to elaborate on one way in which the relationship of normative theory to ordinary social action is problematic. I then discuss Brian Leiter's application of a Heideggerian account of practical understanding to judgments of relevance and precedent in legal decision-making. Leiter argues that, if correct, a Heideggerian account of intelligent but mindless coping leaves normative legal theory problematically detached from what judges actually do when they decide cases. I use this example to show that what normative social theories generally must overcome is this problem of detachment. I briefly discuss Pierre Schlag's gloomy assessment of the state of current legal scholarship with respect to the problem as well. Leiter and Schlag both suggest – in different ways – that overcoming this problem of detachment is a matter of studying the practical sense – that is, the intelligent but non-mentalistic intentions –

judges use when they decide cases. (I do not, however, put forward a practical sense theory of legal adjudication.)

Second, I turn to Dewey, for he both articulates this problem of detachment in the broader context of social theory and proposes a solution to it. Dewey is interested in the affective relationship between higher-order reflective thought and what he calls “primary experience.” I will analyze his argument about “Romantic Individualism” because it clearly articulates in a broader context the problem of detachment which I discussed with respect to normative legal theories. Dewey proposes an important way in which the problem of detachment of social theories from ordinary social action can be solved. His proposal focuses on the reformulation of the operative concepts of a social theory in the face of intelligent social actions and practices. Put crudely, Dewey suggests that social theories can more effectively achieve their pragmatic goals if they rid themselves of old concepts which were derived from by-gone social practices.

I will conclude, finally, by arguing that Dewey’s “janitorial” task of concept-revision must be supplemented by what Bourdieu calls self-reflexivity. Dewey’s normative claims are valuable, but limited, because they put too much faith in the capacity of social theorists to rethink the operative concepts of their own social theories. Bourdieu’s concept of self-reflexivity moves normative social theories beyond the representations intellectuals have of their own activity. In focusing social theory on the social conditions of production of its own forms of knowledge and understanding, self-reflexivity helps to overcome the detachment of theory from practice and gives normative social theories opportunities to effectuate their ideals in practice.

*Normative Legal Theory: Positivism, Formalism and Realism*

Legal theorists are almost exclusively concerned with the relationship between theory and practice.<sup>88</sup> In what follows, I will begin by discussing the legal realists' take on the relationship between theories about what the law is and the actual activity of judges. What the legal realists helpfully demonstrated was that the relationship between legal concepts is indeterminate with respect to legal practices, in particular, to the decisions made by judges. I will use this insight as a departure point for a more specific discussion of indeterminacy between normative legal theories in particular and the decision-making processes of judges.<sup>89</sup> In an essay applying Heidegger's depiction of practical understanding to the activity of legal adjudication, Leiter argues that there may be no reason to believe that the know-how judges use to make decisions could ever be formalized in a legal theory, and that, as a consequence, normative legal thought may be problematically detached from actual legal practice. Finally, then, in conclusion, I will briefly discuss Pierre Schlag's concern about the deleterious effects of this detachment of normative legal theory from legal practice on legal practice itself.

This case study of law is meant to introduce my claim that social theories have the potential to become problematically detached from ordinary social actions and practices. This problem of detachment poses a serious challenge to the central aims of normative social theories. I will go on in the next section to suggest how normative accounts of social action can work against this tendency. They can do so, I will argue, by reformulating their operative concepts in light of what I will call the autochthonous intelligence of social actions and practices.

At the risk of giving a far-too quick account of particular streams of thought in the history of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Anglo-American legal theory, it is worth briefly noting the central claims to

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<sup>88</sup> By "legal theorists," I mean academic legal theorists who are principally concerned with broad questions about the nature of law. My focus will be on those legal theories concerned with the nature of judicial decision-making and the relationship between legal theory itself and actual legal practices.

<sup>89</sup> Here I use "indeterminacy" in a different sense than in the previous chapter, where I spoke of "positive indeterminacy."

which the arguments of the legal realists were a response. In the background of much of the study of the relationship between legal theory and legal practice are the related arguments of legal positivism and legal formalism. Both positivism and formalism were responses to the history of various theories of natural law, which coalesce around the claim that the content and legitimation of laws is set in some sense by nature. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, legal positivism was most directly associated with John Austin's "command theory" of law, which argued that law is nothing but the command of a sovereign backed by force, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the work of H.L.A. Hart. Adapting arguments from ordinary language analysis, Hart made a seminal distinction, as he put it, between what law is (positive law) and what law ought to be (e.g. a form of morality). (1958, 594) Although the core group of American legal realists – Oliver Wendell Holmes, Karl Llewellyn, and Felix Cohen, perhaps<sup>90</sup> – historically predated Hart, they shared his emphasis on positive, real-world legal practices and similarly eschewed naturalistic justifications of law.

Legal realism developed as a response to arguments made by legal formalists, the views of which were an offshoot of positivism. Legal formalists hold essentially the same views as legal positivists, but while the former apply those views to the activity of judges, the latter apply them to the activity of legislatures. Formalists hold that all judicial decisions can be made solely by inquiry into the relations between legal concepts. Formalism, in other words, is a "closed" view of the law (closed to the importance or relevance of non-legal considerations, that is, such as moral ideals). With respect at least to the activity of judges, formalists argue that the proper replacement of argumentation from natural law (or more generally, substantive ethical or moral claims) is argumentation from self-contained legal concepts.

American legal realism rejected these claims and argued instead that:

- (1) Law is defined by what judges do

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<sup>90</sup> No single doctrine defined the legal realists. As a result, it is difficult to say exactly who its most important proponents were.

- (2) What judges do is make decisions using both legal and non-legal reasons
- (3) Law is legitimized by actual judicial decision-making

These claims represent a reaction to formalism because what judges do, according to legal realists, in Leiter's estimation, is respond to the stimulus of the facts of the case rather than to legal rules and reasons. (2002, 6) Or, as Holmes put it, in a defining statement: "the fallacy to which I refer [in the formalist definition of law] is the notion that the only force at work in the development of the law is logic." (1997, 997) Holmes' argument that legal propositions and maxims do not solve concrete legal cases stands in some sense as the rallying cry for legal realists. Its central implication, as Leiter points out, is that legal concepts are problematically indeterminate with respect to adjudication. (2002, 3) More specifically, legal reasons are indeterminate in two senses according to legal realists, Leiter argues: they are rationally indeterminate, in the sense that legal reasons and concepts are said to be unable to justify a unique decision in every case, and they are causally or explanatorily indeterminate, in the sense that judges are believed to generally make decisions for non-legal reasons. (2002, 3)

This argument about indeterminacy introduces my claim about the relationship between legal realism and the possible and problematic detachment of legal theory from legal practice. In a different vein, Hart introduced useful vocabulary for the problem on which I want to focus. What he called "problems of the penumbra" are cases that ambiguously fall within the shadow of a legal rule, where the proper application of a concept is unclear. Hart, however, did not believe that problems of the penumbra undermined the relationship between the normative concepts laid out by legal theorists and actual judicial decision making. Hart did not believe that problems of the penumbra, in other words, implied an unavoidable indeterminacy between legal theory and legal practice. Legal realists, on the other hand, perhaps unintentionally, did in fact problematize this relationship. I say unintentionally because they did so by putting forward a now-debunked behaviorist notion about the prediction of actual judicial outcomes.



Holmes famously argued that “the primary rights and duties with which jurisprudence busies itself again are nothing but prophecies [of what judges will decide].” (1997, 991) The predictive task of legal realism was grounded in the assumption, deeply influenced by the behaviorism in vogue in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that if one could identify the “stimulus” of an action (in this case, the factual scenarios relevant to a legal case), one could predict the likely “response” of judges (i.e. their judicial decisions). (Leiter, 2002, 2) Though he may not have been as influenced by the behaviorism of his day as some of his contemporaries, Karl Llewellyn made a similar seminal claim: “what these officials do about disputes,” he wrote, “is, to my mind, the law itself.” (2008, 5, emphasis removed) Legal theory therefore becomes a predictive science. Predictions of judicial activity tended to be thematized in two ways by legal realists, according to Leiter: the “sociological” legal realists argued that judicial decisions fall into predictable patterns given by the social forces operating on judges, while the “idiosyncratic” legal realists argued that judicial decisions are determined by the idiosyncratic facts of judges’ psychology and personality. (2002, 9)

I do not intend to argue against the realists’ emphasis on prediction or its zeal for an ostensibly scientific approach to law. I take it as self-evident that behaviorism is generally unsatisfying and that the take-away point made by the realists about predicting judicial outcomes is that legal theories must ultimately be derived from – and not detached from – what legal practitioners actually do. My focus, then, is on the problem of indeterminacy identified by the legal realists, which they may or may not have solved. Llewellyn eloquently captured the central intuition of legal realists off of which I want to build my case about the relationship between normative legal theory and legal practice and, ultimately, about the relationship between social theories and ordinary social actions and practices. He writes:

We have discovered in our teaching of the law that general propositions are empty. We have discovered that students who come eager to learn the rules and who do learn them, *and who learning nothing more*, will take away the shell and not the substance. We have

discovered that rules *alone*, mere forms of words, are worthless. We have learned that the concrete instance, the heaping up of concrete instances, the present, vital memory of a multitude of concrete instances, is necessary in order to make any general proposition, be it rule of law or any other, *mean* anything at all. (2008, 4)

This problem of the indeterminacy of legal rules – or problems of the penumbra – is critical to any account of the pragmatic efficacy of normative legal theory. If the realists are right that judges make decisions at least in-part for non-legal reasons, then it becomes paramount for normative legal theory to show how it can improve the law by affecting, in some sense, those non-legal decision-making processes. Key to this normative task is what exactly it means to make a decision for a non-legal reason. The realists did not contest the claim that *reasoning* exhausts the possible ways judges might make decisions; they simply thought that legal reasons do not exhaust the scope of the kinds of reasons judges use to decide cases. Interestingly, Llewellyn's legal realism may be an important exception to this point, for he made more of the practical sense used by judges when deciding cases than other legal realists, and Llewellyn's account of practical sense may be irreducible to explicit reason-giving. (I am not nearly enough of a scholar of Llewellyn's writing to put this point forward less tentatively. I will, however, briefly discuss Llewellyn's notion of the "horse-sense" needed by judges more below.) Nonetheless, on the whole, the realists did not challenge the idea that judicial decisions are comprised of nothing but reasons. In other words, they did not challenge, or articulate an explicit challenge, to the notion that judicial decisions can be represented as a set of beliefs characterized by propositions. On the lights of the legal realists, then, there may be no reason in principle that the problem of indeterminacy is insurmountable. If judges make decisions using nothing but reasons (of one sort or another), the problem of rational indeterminacy between legal concepts and adjudication, to use Leiter's language, seems avoidable. All we need are better legal theories to represent, and then to give guidance for, the legal and non-legal reasons judges use to make decisions.

If it is the case that judges decide cases in ways that are intelligent but are not reducible to reasons, however, the problem of indeterminacy looms larger. I will now discuss Leiter's application of Heidegger's argument about the background of practical understanding to legal adjudication. His suggestion raises the possibility that legal theories *can never* fully describe what judges do, and that normative legal theories as a result may be unavoidably detached from the very actions of ordinary judges which those theories are meant to guide.

### *Legal Theory and Legal Practice*

For two central reasons, I turn now to Leiter's application of Heidegger's account of practical understanding to the study of legal adjudication. First, his ultimate concern is with the potential detachment of normative legal theory from actual legal practice. I consider this concern to be an important case study in the potential for normative accounts of social action to be efficacious in achieving their practical ends (i.e. to affect practices). Second, Leiter's argument implies that the study of the affective relationship between normative legal theory and actual legal practice is deeply tied to conceptions of practical understanding. His argument helps to show, in other words, why non-mentalistic intelligent action is a key factor in considerations regarding the practical success of normative social theories. Leiter builds upon the realist claim that the concepts of legal theories may be problematically indeterminate with respect to legal practice. He does so by putting forward an explicit account of the practical intelligence used by judges which is fundamentally unlike the use of reasons.

Leiter argues that the founding assumption of legal theory is that any normative account of what judges ought to do is parasitic upon what judges actually do. (1996, 255) He then suggests that this founding assumption may not hold if Heidegger is right about the meaning of

practical understanding.<sup>91</sup> I will briefly describe Leiter's argument and then discuss why, if correct, it helps to explain real-world problems in legal practice. I will then move on to show why this diagnosis applies to problems facing normative social theories in general.

Leiter constructs his argument around the relationship between legal considerations of relevance and precedent. In short, judges must understand what is relevant to what in order to apply the doctrine of precedent when making legal decisions. Leiter alludes to Holmes' story of a Vermont judge before whom a suit was brought by a farmer who claimed that his butter churn was broken by a neighbor. Upon examination of legal statutes, Holmes reports, the judge could find nothing about churns and thus gave judgment for the defendant. (1997, 1006) The purpose of Holmes' example is to show that judgments of relevance are key elements of legal adjudication. The judge failed to determine which written statutes were relevant to the case at hand. Leiter's Heideggerian suggestion, then, is that judgments of relevance are derived from the practical understanding of judges and are therefore unavailable to theoretical or propositional articulation. Judgments of relevance, in other words, are not based on reasons. One of the central implications of Heidegger's account of practical understanding, as I have argued, is that it can never be made explicit without fundamental distortion.<sup>92</sup> Leiter works with this intuition as well. Judgments of relevance, he argues, do not have criteria, but are instead a part of the background of practical skills which comprise the practical understanding of judges. This means that judges can therefore never completely thematize what they do when making legal decisions. (1996, 261)

This point returns Leiter to his original claim – that the founding assumption of any normative theory of legal adjudication is parasitic upon an accurate description of what judges actually do – which, he concludes, does not seem possible as a result. In sum, Leiter concludes: “this should prove worrisome on the plausible assumption that we can only better assess what we

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<sup>91</sup> It should be noted that Leiter does not argue that Heidegger *is* right. He suggests that if Heidegger is right, then normative legal theory's presumption about the relationship between prescription and description becomes problematic.

<sup>92</sup> See Chapter Four

*ought* to be doing if we actually know what we *are* doing,” continuing, “but if Heidegger is right, then there is a lot that judges are doing in deciding cases, that we, as jurisprudential theorists, cannot articulate or, consequently, cannot subject to critical evaluation.” (1996, 277) Leiter alludes to Llewellyn’s related claim in *The Common Law Tradition* in order to emphasize the point that practical understanding derives from a social actor’s involvement with ordinary social actions and practices:

One reason, no doubt, that Llewellyn thought that the ideal judge was one who had been thoroughly immersed in the mercantile culture on which he now sits in judgment is precisely because only by knowing, say, the ‘meaning’ of the churn in its practical contexts can one possibly decide what precedent is or is not relevant. If, of course, one could have a complete theory of churns and their place in farming culture, and a complete theory of every other item of equipment and its place in its particular economic culture, then one could presumably generate the needed theory of relevance. But do we have such a theory? Plainly not. Rather, we seem to depend on the practical sensitivity of judges to the similarities and differences appropriate to each cause.<sup>93</sup> (1996, 273)

From these points, Leiter concludes that theories of legal adjudication may be intrinsically limited. Because normative legal theory is parasitic upon a descriptive account of legal practice, Leiter takes the impossibility of giving a complete description of what judges do to signify a potential handicap on the prescriptive power of legal theory. (1996, 276) “Good judges,” he writes, “immersed as they are in their adjudicative practices, make these judgments all the time; but if the foregoing sketch is right, there is no reason to think any *theory* could ever do justice to what they are doing.” (1996, 276)

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<sup>93</sup> Llewellyn’s draft of Article 2 of the Uniform Commercial Code – which is still in use today – demonstrates how this claim plays out in practice. It requires that judges assume good faith toward the norms of commercial culture, which means, of course, that they must have a practical sensitivity toward those norms. (Leiter, 2002, 14) Llewellyn puts the point well: when addressing the requirements of acting as business counsel, he writes, “[it] is impossible unless the lawyer who attempts it knows not only the rules of the law, knows not only what these rules mean in terms of predicting what the courts will do, but knows, in addition, the life of the community, the needs and practices of his client – knows, in a word, the *working situation* which he is called upon to shape *as well as* the law with reference to which he is called upon to shape it.” (2008, 17)

Leiter, does, however, conclude his argument with tentative support for practical reasoning theories of legal adjudication. To examine these is beyond the scope of my focus here, although it would be apropos of Leiter's turn to Heidegger to suggest – which he does not for some reason – a consideration of Gadamer's arguments about the application of understanding, which Gadamer claims can never be reduced to a theoretical method, as a way to develop a model of practical jurisprudential reasoning.<sup>94</sup> For my purposes, the point to emphasize is that Leiter depicts the success of legal theory in terms of its relationship to the practical sense of legal practitioners. He cites Robert Rodes' depiction of a soccer referee, for example, whose discretion and sensitivity to the demands of the situation are perhaps a better image of law at work than Dworkin's Hercules.<sup>95</sup> (1996, 278) To similar effect, he cites Llewellyn's notion of the “horse-sense” that good judges need in order to make good jurisprudential decisions.

Leiter's concern is focused on the theoretical reach of normative legal arguments, but there may be more pressing reasons to be concerned if his arguments are right. It stands to reason that legal practices are in some sense detached from legal theories if the latter are ineluctably limited in their capacity to describe, and thereafter guide, what judges actually do. But why is this detachment a problem? Pierre Schlag puts forward one possibility.

Schlag is worried about epiphenomenalism. He believes that the kind of indeterminacy between legal theories and actual legal practices described by Leiter implies that the content of legal theories is merely the by-product of social practices. (1991, 850) This is a bold claim.<sup>96</sup> He argues for it by analyzing various ways that legal theorists conceive of their own normative

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<sup>94</sup> See, for example, *Truth and Method*, pg. 360. Legal hermeneutics develops these claims. See, for example, Charles W. Collier, “Law as Interpretation,” in *Chicago-Kent Law Review* (Vol. 76, 2000-2001), pgs. 779-823.

<sup>95</sup> Dworkin's Judge Hercules is an idealized fictional figure – an omnipotent judge – whose capacity to find the one right answer to any moral question ostensibly defends Dworkin's interpretive approach to adjudication (via the “right answer thesis”). Rodes' point is presumably that a better idealized image of judicial decision-making than an omnipotent reasoner like Hercules is the soccer referee who is rich in practical know-how.

<sup>96</sup> Legal realism, may have laid the groundwork for this kind of claim, according to Leiter; the realists raised the possibility that “legal rules and reasons figure simply as post-hoc rationalizations for decisions reached on the basis of non-legal considerations.” (2002, 1)

purposes. Schlag's goal is to show that these various conceptualizations – that, for example, normative legal theorists influence intellectual judges, who in turn influence legal practice generally, or that normative legal theorists provide grist for the argumentative mill of judicial decisions – are at best distractions from the “games of power” which really comprise legal practice and are at worst cover-ups for the social privilege of legal theorists. On a twist of Dworkin's tome *Law's Empire*, Schlag focuses his analysis on what he calls “*L.A. Law's Empire*.”

Many of Schlag's claims – particularly those about the games of power which purportedly comprise the real world of *L.A. Law's Empire* – amount to unargued and somewhat shrill assertions. But Schlag's analysis of legal theory is useful because it analyzes the practical effects of the detachment of legal theories from legal practices. Schlag's concern is that legal theory becomes increasingly alienated from the actual activity of legal professionals when it fails to recognize that those practices operate according to their own practical sense.<sup>97</sup> The result, he argues, is that legal theory and legal practice come to live in two different worlds. Schlag suggests that “. . . doctrines, arguments, causes of action, defenses, and the like will undergo an almost magical metamorphosis. They will be recast as the rhetorical moves that allow lawyers, clients, and courts, to get more of what it is they want.” (1991, 803) These are not the effects that legal theory envisions for itself. In order to contextualize this claim, Schlag alludes to MacIntyre's argument in *After Virtue* about the relationship between extant social practices and the potential alienation of the operative concepts of social theories from them. He writes:

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<sup>97</sup> Another of the problems of Schlag's analysis is that he equates what one might call a Heideggerian account of practical sense with a Nietzschean account of power. The tenuous link between these hugely different views of social life for Schlag is the sense that ordinary life is comprised of diverse social practices which have little to do with higher-order theoretical accounts of social life. Quoting Sarat and Felstiner, for example, Schlag writes that professional power in legal practice “‘is based not on rules but on local knowledge, insider access, connections, and reputation. Lawyers often suggest that their most important contribution is knowledge of the ropes, not knowledge of the rules; they describe a system that is not bureaucratically rational but is, nonetheless, accessible to its ‘priests.’” (1991, 804) Local knowledge, which is dependent on knowing the ropes rather than the rules, sounds something like an account of practical understanding, of the kind derived from arguments made by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu. To this end, Schlag's view is useful. It is unfortunate that he conflates an account of local knowledge with one of insider access and power.

By and large, normative legal thought has assumed its own psychology, sociology, rhetoric. The sociology, psychology, and rhetoric assumed into existence by normative legal thought is largely the unconscious concretization of its own *posited* aesthetic of social life – an aesthetic inherited from worlds now long since gone. There is little to support the social aesthetic of normative legal thought other than fiat and the power of academic inertia. Unfortunately for normative legal thought, its *posited* understandings of the psychological, the social, and the rhetorical are now stunningly anachronistic and strikingly discordant with much of what leading work in the humanities and social sciences have to tell us about human beings and what they do. (1991, 869)

These conclusions are free-standing; they do not necessarily follow from the detachment of legal theory from legal practice. But they serve well to show why this possible detachment does more than raise the specter of impotence for normative legal theory. The detachment of legal theory from legal practice may harm actual legal practice. Schlag argues that normative legal theory serves to dress up the ugly realities of professional lawyering. He believes that the primary significance of normative legal thought is performative; it promotes the self-image of the law. “When lawyers harass, coerce, intimidate, etc,” he writes, “they do it with nice words, the nice arguments, the nice jurisprudence crafted by normative legal thinkers.” (1991, 865-866)

Furthermore, Schlag believes that intellectual distinctions between the idealities of normative legal theory and the realities of legal practices produce disjunctive cognitive expectations in legal students about what happens, on the one hand, in the legal classroom and, on the other, in the legal clinic. (1991, 927) His concern transcends normative legal theory itself, focusing also upon the many social distinctions which enforce the boundary between theory and practice (e.g. regular faculty vs. clinical faculty). Schlag’s central focus is on how normative legal theory itself helps to create and perpetuate these boundaries. His ultimate worry is this:

The social significance of this separation is that it constructs students who behave as if the two worlds – the legal clinic and the traditional classroom – have little to do with each other. Students quickly learn that anything assimilated in the legal clinic is irrelevant to the traditional classroom in which the law is explored from ‘the internal perspective.’ The student learns that she can be one kind of law person in the clinic and a completely different kind of law person in the classroom. (1991, 928)



My claim, of course, does not stand or fall with this gloomy view of the legal world. What Schlag is right to do, however, is trace the social effects of normative legal theory with respect to its detachment from ordinary legal practice. Ultimately, I think Schlag may in fact be right that “the cherished ‘ideals’ of legal academic thought are implicated in the reproduction and maintenance of precisely those ugly ‘realities’ of legal practice the academy so routinely condemns.” (1991, 805) However, he need not be in order to usefully demonstrate that there may be unhappy real-world effects which follow from the insulation and segregation of legal theory from legal practice.

In the next section, I will show why these arguments about legal theory are germane to normative accounts of social action which aspire to have an effect upon ordinary social actions and practices. I will focus upon Dewey’s analysis of the detachment of “reflection” from “primary experience.” Dewey holds similar views to the legal realists about the general relationship between theory and practice.

### *Dewey on Theory and Experience*

Dewey recognizes that social theories can become problematically detached from ordinary social actions and practices. What’s especially valuable about Dewey’s view is that he proposes a solution to this problem. In this section, I will show why I understand Dewey’s view of the relationship between theory and practice to be similar to mine and to the one I have developed through the case study of normative legal theory. In the next section, I will elaborate on Dewey’s solution to the problem of detachment, via his arguments about what he calls “Romantic Individualism.” I will suggest that Dewey puts forward a useful (but also not unproblematic) notion of “concept reformulation” in social theory.

Dewey's view of the relationship between theory and practice is similar to mine in three central senses. First, Dewey's understanding of the difference between what he calls "primary" and "secondary" experiences mirrors the distinction between ordinary intelligent action and higher-order accounts of ordinary action, the distinction which has been the principle subject of this dissertation. Second, Dewey argues that secondary experience – or "reflection" – has a problematic tendency to become detached from ordinary intelligent action, which Dewey describes as "know-how." Third, Dewey believes that this tendency to become detached from ordinary experience represents a significant failure for philosophy in general. I will elaborate on each of these claims in turn.

Dewey defines primary experiences as the "non-cognitive but experienced subject-matter which gives what is *known* its import." Secondary experiences are reflections and explanations of primary experiences. (1981, 254 and 266) Often Dewey simply calls primary experiences "experience" and secondary experiences "philosophy." It is my contention that these terms are close enough to what I have called ordinary intelligent action and higher-order theoretical accounts of social action that I may use them fruitfully in this discussion.

Dewey associates primary experience with what he perhaps idiosyncratically calls "nature," writing, "it is not experience which is experienced, but nature – stones, plants, animals, diseases, health, temperature, electricity, and so on." (1981, xxv) His general interest is in describing ordinary experience and how it becomes "funded," or meaningful, and *only thereafter* the object of reflection. What Dewey defines as "mind" is misleadingly close to what I have called mindless intelligence; mind, according to Dewey, is the "active and eager *background* which lies in wait and engages whatever comes its way." (1958, 104, emphasis added) A key quotation from Chapter One of this dissertation makes it clear that Dewey is concerned with ordinary intelligent action that is non-mentalistic. Relying on the concept of "habit" suffused throughout American Pragmatists' writing, Dewey argues:

We may be said to *know how* by means of our habits . . . We walk and read aloud, we get off and on street cars, we dress and undress, and do a thousand useful acts without thinking of them. We know something, namely, how to do them . . . [If] we choose to call [this] knowledge . . . then other things also called knowledge, knowledge *of* and *about* things, knowledge *that* things are thus and so, knowledge that involved reflection and conscious appreciation, remains of a different sort. (1922, 177)

Dewey's concept of habit obviously has many important similarities to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. Although Bourdieu is critical of Dewey at times (for reasons which I will discuss in the final section of this chapter) and however much Bourdieu claims that the generative, active element of *habitus* is precisely what distinguishes it from habit, it is simply impossible not to hear strong echoes of Bourdieu's account of practical sense when Dewey writes, for example, that "through habits formed in intercourse with the world, we also in-habit the world. It becomes a home, and the home is part of our every experience." (1958, 104) Inasmuch as I have endorsed much of what Bourdieu says about the nature of ordinary social action, it is important to note that Bourdieu himself writes, "I would say that the theory of practical sense presents many similarities with theories, such as Dewey's, that grant a central role to the notion of habit, understood as an active and creative relation to the world . . ." (1992, 122)

The key point which links Dewey's account of primary experience to my view of ordinary intelligent action is that, on Dewey's lights, primary experience is funded by ordinary habitual action. This means that primary experience does not require reflection in order to become meaningful or coherent. Reflection may *add* to the intelligence of ordinary action, in Dewey's view, but only when done in the right way. (And *what* reflection adds is the subject of empirical study, according to Dewey; see below for more.) "Cognitive experience," he writes, "must originate within that of a non-cognitive sort." (1981, 267) Dewey labels those who think otherwise "intellectualists," a term shared of course, and for similar reasons, with Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty. Intellectualists, Dewey claims, are those who believe that ordinary experience is, at bottom, a way of knowing about things. Intellectualism is wrong, "for things are objects to be

treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured, even more than things to be known.

They are things *had* before they are things cognized.” (1981, 265)

Of course, Dewey does not speak of “social theories” or “accounts of social action” in the terms I do. He speaks of philosophy, reflection, and “secondary experience.” Because my purpose is to utilize Dewey’s considerations about the latter – philosophy, reflection, etc – in order to make a point about the former – social theory generally – I will move between these various terms perhaps slightly more freely than historical accuracy warrants. I believe I am being faithful, however, to Dewey’s abiding interests and the significance of the claims he makes. My reasons for turning to Dewey have to do with his orientation towards the question of the relationship of theory to practice, which mirrors my own.

Dewey’s concern is that secondary experiences have a problematic tendency to become detached from primary experiences. His fear is that there is something endemic to reflection itself that detaches thought from experience. “Philosophy, like all forms of reflective analysis,” Dewey believes, has a “standing temptation” to identify the “objects of knowledge” with what he calls “ultimately real objects,” or the phenomena of ordinary experience. “Philosophy . . . takes us away, for the time being,” he writes, “from the things had in primary experience as they directly act and are acted upon, used and enjoyed.” (181, 264)

This claim mirrors Leiter’s analysis of normative legal theory. His fear is that higher-order (legal) theories are intrinsically limited in their ability to describe what judges do. This is not a “temptation,” as Dewey claims, but rather a fact embedded in the very relationship between theory and practice, according to Leiter. However, if Leiter is correct about the limitations of higher-order legal theories, he then would have to be critical of any account of adjudication which purports to give a complete account of the processes of judicial decision-making. In this sense, Leiter might agree that those mistaken accounts of adjudication have fallen prey to the temptation Dewey describes.

While for Leiter the problem of detachment seems to be a problematic offshoot of a Heideggerian analysis of mindless coping, for Dewey, the problem of detachment motivates an entire philosophical method. In *Experience and Nature*, what he calls “empirical naturalism” is the study of the relationship of theoretical conceptualization to the existential conditions that are non-cognitively present in human experience. Dewey wants to know how what we do as philosophers relates to the form of ordinary, primary experience. It is deeply problematic in Dewey’s view if philosophy is detached from experience as he sees it.

Finally, Dewey believes that the practical effects of philosophical activity on ordinary experience acquire an empirical value with which the success or failure of that activity can be measured. Put simply, he believes that philosophy fails when it fails to affect the experiences of ordinary men and women. When Dewey argues against the idea of a “block universe,” his point is that the ordinary experiences of social actors are changed and affected by what he calls intelligent reflection. He writes, “the *ways* in which we believe and expect have a tremendous affect [sic] upon *what* we believe and expect.” (1981, 260) The quality of these changes is the measure of philosophy’s worth. This claim is consistent with my reasons for turning to Schlag in the previous chapter, for he attempts to describe and evaluate the real-world effects of higher-order detachment on legal practice.

In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey develops an argument about the success of second-order accounts of social life generally, the purpose of which is to fight against the possibility of detachment. (1981, 263-264) He describes this evaluative process in terms of verification. When Dewey speaks of testing theories against primary experiences for verification, however, he goes beyond what I have discussed as the success of normative accounts of social action. For Dewey, the relationship between theory and practice tests the truth content of a philosophical theory. This is a strong and controversial claim, but is orthogonal to my reasons for turning to Dewey. More to the point is that Dewey is concerned with the effects of higher-order theories on ordinary experience. He believes that one *ought* to study these effects; doing so is among the most central

purposes of philosophy in his estimation. He writes, “. . . the genuine problem is how and why, *to what effect*, things thus experienced are transformed into objects in which cognized traits are supreme and affectional and volitional traits incidental and subsidiary.”<sup>98</sup> (1981, 266, emphasis added)

Dewey believes that the test of a theory’s worth is simply whether or not it renders ordinary life experiences more significant and makes our dealings with the world more fruitful. (1981, 256) Taylor makes much the same claim, as I discussed in Chapter Four. This claim is perhaps frustratingly vague, inasmuch as an important task of a normative social theory may be to define what counts as a more significant or fruitful experience. I will have more to say about this problem in the final section of the chapter. But the claim’s vagueness does not take away from its valuable point about the practical efficaciousness of normative social theories. However “significant” and “fruitful” experiences are defined, if the theories which define and presume to promote them fail in fact *to* promote them – on the lights of whatever definition – then those theories must be said to fail in an important sense. Perhaps more than any other, this point legitimizes looking to Dewey for guidance in understanding the affective relationship of theory to practice.

### *The Reformulation of Concepts and “Romantic Individualism”*

Dewey proposes an important solution to the problem of higher-order detachment from ordinary practice in his essay about concepts of “romantic individualism.” In order to achieve its

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<sup>98</sup> In a Kuhnian sense, Dewey cites Einstein in order to support the claim that secondary experiences affect their subject matter. After Einstein, he points out, new phenomena came to light demanding to be studied which simply could not have had the significance granted to them prior to the advent of new concepts and ideas. (1981, 255) Granted, the phenomena revealed by Einstein have little to do with primary experiences, at least directly. But perhaps this speaks more to the difference between natural scientific theories and social theories than it does to the idea that secondary experiences affect their subjects.

affective goals, philosophy must be willing to change the commonsense conceptual categories which it uses to understand social actions and practices, Dewey argues. It must do so in light of what I will call the “autochthony” of social practices. I will refer to Dewey’s view as the ideal of concept reformulation. I will argue that this ideal is useful for solving the problem of detachment. However, I will also suggest that the ideal of concept reformulation as Dewey articulates it is problematically vague. In the next section, I will argue that it must be supplemented by what Bourdieu calls self-reflexivity in social science.

Dewey believed that American culture in his time was problematically attached to romantic ideals of individualism, ideals which had become outstripped by new forms of culture and society. His argument is based on a distinction between “material” and “moral” culture, a distinction I take to be derived from – or perhaps even synonymous with – Dewey’s distinction between primary and secondary experiences.<sup>99</sup> For while moral culture encapsulates our ideals, theories and self-reflections, material culture describes for Dewey the empirical reality of social practices, actions and institutions. The latter, in Dewey’s time, was characterized by momentous changes in industry, technology, patterns of social exchange, relationships to and of the control of nature, and the shrinking of time and distance.

Dewey’s essential claim is that the moral culture of his time had failed to recognize the significance of these changes. He writes, “our material culture, as anthropologists would call it, is verging upon the collective and corporate. Our moral culture, along with our ideology, is, on the other hand, still saturated with ideals and values of an individualism derived from the prescientific, pretechnological age.” (1981, 609) Failures to understand this disjunction causes social theories to become detached from social practices, a problem which in turn creates rather than alleviates social problems: “. . . the older mental equipment remained after its causes and

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<sup>99</sup> It may be too quick to identify primary experience with material culture. Dewey is, of course, not known for his exacting conceptual distinctions and definitions. There is, however, shared ground here, enough so to follow the thread of Dewey’s core idea.

foundations had disappeared. This, fundamentally, is the inner division out of which spring our present confusion and insincerities.” (1981, 610)

Romantic individualism was derived from an era in which primary experiences were deeply involved with the exigencies of developing a new nation. Dewey associates such individualism with wilderness, privation, and the spirit of pioneers. But because “wilderness exists [now] in the movie and in the novel,” and not in the experiences of most ordinary people, the romantic individualism derived from it acts more to perpetuate than to alleviate social unrest. The task to which philosophy ought to contribute, then, Dewey claims, is “that of remaking society to serve the growth of a new type of individual.” (1981, 612)

Dewey’s analysis of romantic individualism mirrors Bourdieu’s concept of “hysteresis.” Bourdieu’s use of the term is unique, although it is not unrelated to the more standard social scientific usage, which has to do with the causal effects of the past on present social practices. The term hysteresis is derived from the Greek, meaning “lagging behind.” It generally applies the idea of a lag in response time exhibited by a body in reacting to the forces that affect it, as studied by physicists, to social science. Social actors, Bourdieu believes, sometime exhibit skills and understandings – in short, a *habitus* – whose time of acquisition has passed. He cites two examples of hysteresis. The first is what he calls “social ageing,” and the second, following Marx’s frequent allusion to Cervantes’ novel, the “Don Quixote effect.” In both cases, social actors are defined by archaic social conditions and a lag is created between an evolving social field and unchanged dispositions. Hysteresis is particularly common after a radical transformation of a social field (a point which is particularly apropos of my arguments in Chapter Six). (2000, 160) The outcome of experiences like this is that one’s practical expectations, which are usually in sync with the social world, become frustrated or unfulfilled. Hysteresis acts like a tennis ball which has tipped the net and thus caused the player to feel the difference between what happened and what should have happened. (2000, 162) And, foreshadowing what he will say about effective normative theories, Bourdieu writes, “the transformation of *habitus* lies in the gap,



experienced as a positive or negative surprise, between expectations and experience.” (2000, 149) This lag between expectations and experience is emblematic of the problems Dewey intends to solve.

Dewey’s worry about romantic individualism also closely mirrors MacIntyre’s arguments about moral language and virtue, which I discussed in Chapter One in order to introduce my concern about the detachment of higher-order theories from ordinary actions and practices. Dewey and MacIntyre share the claim that a set of explanatory or normative categories can become outstripped by changes in material culture (in Dewey’s terms) or in practices (in MacIntyre’s terms). Dewey departs from MacIntyre, however, in the kind of solution he proposes to solve this problem. MacIntyre suggests that we return to a concept of virtue like that used by Aristotle in order to overcome the disjunction between ordinary moral practices and inert moral theories. Dewey, on the other hand, suggests that reflective theories must revise their operative concepts in light of changes in social practice. This emphasis on concept reformulation more closely resembles a Kuhnian analysis of progress in the natural sciences than it does MacIntyre’s arguments about virtue. In this vein, Rosenberg argues that the greatest obstacle to progress in the natural science has been the failure to realize that conceptual commonsense categories need changing. Historically, it has taken a Newton or a Darwin for scientists to recognize this kind of need, Rosenberg argues. (2008, 16) Dewey’s argument about overcoming the detachment of theory from practice resembles this one.<sup>100</sup>

Dewey believes that philosophical theories – like natural scientific theories – can open new ways of thinking and uncover new fields for inquiry. His task is “janitorial.” It recommends that theorists abandon old concepts which were derived from the problems facing bygone eras. Richard Rorty offers an example of what Dewey might mean by the kind of concepts we ought to abandon.

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<sup>100</sup> I do not know, however, what Dewey would say about the claim that reflective philosophies require a genius on the order of a Newton or a Darwin in order to reformulate their operative concepts.

Rorty describes the focus he derived from Dewey in terms of his ongoing fight against “Platonism.” In *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Rorty characterizes his life’s work as fighting against the Platonic idea that humankind’s most distinctive and praiseworthy capacity is to know things as they really are. (1999, xiii) Rorty believes that he and Dewey share the concern that this focus on old Platonic problems weakens social solidarity and should therefore be abandoned. “Our ancestors climbed up a ladder which we are now in a position to throw away,” Rorty writes, continuing, “we can throw it away not because we have reached a final resting place, but because we have different problems to solve than those which perplexed our ancestors.” (1999, xxii) At bottom, Rorty takes from Dewey the belief that the central task of philosophy is to distinguish between old ways of speaking, developed to accomplish earlier tasks, and new ways of speaking, developed in response to present social demands. (1999, 66)

On one interpretation, this claim is banal. Who would deny that the operative concepts of normative social theories ought to apply to problems presently facing social actors? What is powerful about Dewey’s ideal of concept reformulation, however, is that it is based on a view of how first order social actions and practices are autochthonously intelligent. By “autochthonously,” I mean that ordinary social actors are capable of generating, without higher-order articulation, self-directed, coherent and purposive practices. This is why Dewey’s emphasis on “common experiences” is important. Dewey’s ideal of concept reformulation is not simply that theories ought to be in sync with practices. Nor is his suggestion that we simply switch out an older set of concepts for some that are perhaps truer or more internally consistent. Rather, Dewey’s point is that the concepts of social theories ought to be abandoned when they are no longer derived from the self-generating intelligence of social actions and practices. This is what I mean by the “autochthony” of social practice.

The intellectualist position against which Dewey and I are arguing equates the intelligence of social actions and practices with the articulate, higher-order guidance provided by social theories. In a key passage, Dewey writes:

It would not matter much if philosophy had been reserved a luxury of only a few thinkers. We endure many luxuries. The serious matter is that philosophies have denied that common experience is capable of developing from within itself methods which will secure direction for itself and will create inherent standards of judgment and value. No one knows how many of the evils and deficiencies that are pointed to as reason for flight from experience are themselves due to the disregard of experience shown by those peculiarly reflective. To waste of time and energy, to disillusionment with life that attends every deviation from concrete experience must be added the tragic failure to realize the value that intelligent search could reveal and mature among the things of ordinary experience. I cannot calculate how much of current cynicism, indifference and pessimism is due to these causes in the deflection of intelligence they have brought about. (1981, 267-7)

Dewey does not disregard the importance or the power of higher-order reflection. His corpus exhibits a strong faith in the power of reflective thought to solve important social problems. Dewey's concern is that "moral culture" profoundly affects primary experiences and because of this, that the quality of our moral culture is of great importance. But Dewey also persistently reminded his readers to distinguish this faith in reflection from intellectualism. "If we start from primary experience," he writes, "occurring as it does chiefly in modes of action and undergoing, it is easy to see what knowledge contributes – namely, the possibility of intelligent administration of the elements of doing and suffering." (1981, 266) But only if we start from primary experience . . .

The challenging question for a view like Dewey's is what it means to "start from" primary experience. I interpret Dewey's view to mean that normative higher-order reflections must be derived from the autochthony of intelligent social actions and practices. This interpretation helps to make the ideal of concept reformulation more substantive. It identifies *the right task* for social theory. It helpfully suggests that intellectualist accounts of social action may fail to achieve their normative goals because they misunderstand the mechanism of ordinary social action. The possibility of a higher-order theory affecting practice, in other words, depends upon the particular conceptualization of ordinary action in play. However, Dewey's view tells us

very little about *how* higher-order theories can respond to the autochthony of intelligent actions and practices.

What does it mean for an account of social action to be derived from intelligent primary experiences, or “in sync” with them, and yet also be a guide to those primary experiences?

Dewey gives both metaphysical and epistemic priority to primary, non-cognitive experience.

“We have discovered at last,” he writes, for example, “that these ways [of moral culture] are set, almost abjectly so, by social factors, by tradition and the influence of education.” (1981, 260)

This claim faces the problem of epiphenomena, especially in light of Dewey’s strong belief in the affective relationship between higher-order thought and ordinary practice. My general point is not to give a definitive account of Dewey’s view with respect to social determinism or otherwise. My point is to suggest that the ideal of concept reformulation as Dewey articulates it is deeply important but also problematically vague.

The onus is on Dewey – or on anyone arguing for the value of concept reformulation – to answer a number of central problems. First, as I have suggested: how might higher-order concepts “respond to” intelligent practices? Second, if higher-order accounts of social actions are derived from ordinary experience, it follows that first-order experience is not encountered free of interpretation and normative understanding; to what, then, are higher-order accounts responding? Third, more crudely: is Dewey’s view too naively optimistic about the powers of higher-order reflection and specifically about its capacity to reformulate its operative concepts, given what he says about the nature of ordinary experience? In sum, these points suggest that Dewey’s view may be insufficiently suspicious of what Bourdieu calls the *doxa* of a social field. A *doxa* comprises the opaque ideals, assumptions and concepts which operate in the background of even the most assiduously reformulated conceptual schemata. In contrast with the ideal of concept reformulation, Bourdieu’s notion of self-reflexivity is meant to show how social theories can overcome the problem of detachment without overestimating their own self-transparency.

*Self-Reflexivity and the Realpolitik of the Universal*

My goal is to suggest how a normative account of social action might avoid becoming detached from the social actions and practices it intends to guide. This model has two sides: one developed by Dewey and the other by Bourdieu. These two views regarding the effectiveness of normative social theory are related, particularly because they both focus on the practical understanding of ordinary social actors. But these two views are also in tension with one another. I will attempt to show that Bourdieu's account of normative social theory challenges Dewey's ideals but ultimately helps to substantiate them.

These positions can be put rather bluntly. The first is the idea that the concepts which guide normative accounts of social action must be remade in light of the autochthonous intelligence of new social practices. This tactic is the one I take Dewey to support and to articulate in his critique of romantic individualism. His task is janitorial in spirit, seeking to clean up social theory's concepts, abandoning the old and useless ones. This tactic is straightforward and valuable, but it is vague and limited on its own.

The second develops what I take to be a necessary radicalization of Dewey's approach. It is the idea that the best way for normative social theories to overcome detachment is by studying the social conditions of production of social skill and understanding, in particular its (social theory's) own ways of producing knowledge and understanding. In a crude sense, while Dewey's approach is "top-down," Bourdieu's is "bottom-up." Dewey claims that we must work directly on the operative higher-order concepts of our social theories in order to create a better fit between them and the world of practice. Bourdieu, by contrast, argues that we must work on the forms of practice itself which pervade the work of social theory and which give rise to the operative concepts of those theories. And the purpose of working on what Bourdieu calls the "social conditions of production" of higher-order theoretical reflection is not only to create a better fit between theory and practice, as the "melioristic" enterprise of the pragmatists might have it.

Bourdieu suggests that the detachment of social theories from social actions and practices is best avoided, not by simply updating or revising our concepts, but by self-reflexively challenging *whatever* self-representation they give to the social theorist of her own work.

Bourdieu rejects the notion that any social group – social theorists and intellectuals included – can completely come to grips with their own representations of the social world. People are never less likely, Bourdieu believes, “to transcend the ‘limits of their minds’ than in the representation they have and give of their position, which defines those limits.” (2007, 483) This inability to work directly on our own representations of the social world is not, however, caused by a fault or insufficiency in the skills or methods of social theorists. Rather, in Bourdieu’s view, all social fields necessarily operate with some degree of *illusio*. In order to function normally, they must misrecognize the stakes of their own social activity. The operative concepts social theorists use to understand, and perhaps affect, the social world, are positively indeterminate, in the sense I discussed in Chapter Four. I described Bourdieu’s concepts of *illusio* and misrecognition in detail in Chapters Three and Four. My point here is to note the consequences of these claims as Bourdieu sees them for normative social theories.

One of the central consequences is that one must be somewhat skeptical about a vision of social theory like Dewey’s. Bourdieu aims this skepticism at nominalism, which for him means “the will to transform the world by transforming the words for naming it.” (1986, 840) I have found one specific critical remark about Dewey in Bourdieu’s voluminous works and it is aimed at just this nominalist ideal. Writing about the desire to eliminate the difference between high culture and popular culture, Bourdieu says:

To act as if one had only to reject in discourse the dichotomy of high culture and popular culture that exists in reality to make it vanish is to believe in magic. It is a naive form of utopianism or moralism (Dewey, however laudable his stances in matters of art and education, did not escape this kind of moralism fostered by both his epoch and his national philosophical and political traditions). (1992, 84)

This moralism or nominalism founds the ideal of concept reformulation. But if Bourdieu is right that such an ideal leaves the actual mechanisms of social change up to “magic,” then social theorists interested in effectuating their normative ideals must look further.

Bourdieu does not reject nominalism (in his somewhat idiosyncratic usage) outright, however. In a positive sense, he frequently discusses J.L. Austin’s explanation of performative utterances in *How to do Things with Words*. As a sociologist with normative commitments, Bourdieu also wants to do things with words. And, in an indirect concession to Dewey’s ideal, Bourdieu agrees that the revision of the operative concepts which guide the questions, methods and social functions of social theories can in fact affect the social world. Indeed, Bourdieu’s ceaseless attack on various conceptions of social theory attests to his interest in concept reformulation. But Bourdieu believes that these revisions must have more force than the will of the social theorist behind them if they are to avoid mistaking “revolutions in words as revolutions in things.” (2000, 2) In contrast to this magical nominalism, Bourdieu supports what he calls “realist nominalism.” When evaluating the legal field as a social field, he writes:

Nonetheless, the will to transform the world by transforming the words for naming it, by producing new categories of perception and judgment, and by dictating a new vision of social divisions and distributions, can only succeed if the resulting prophecies, or creative evocations, are also, at least in part, well-founded pre-visions, anticipatory descriptions. These visions only call forth what they proclaim – whether new practices, new mores or especially new social groupings – because they announce what is in the process of developing. They are not so much the midwives as the recording secretaries of history. By granting to historical realities or virtualities the recognition that is implicit in prophetic proclamation, they offer them the real possibility of achieving full reality – fully recognized, official existence – through the effect of legitimation, indeed of consecration, implied by publishing and officializing them. Thus only a *realist* nominalism (or one based in reality) allows us to account for the magical effects of *naming* as the term has been used here, and thus for the symbolic imposition of power, which only succeeds because it is fully based in reality. Juridical ratification is the canonical form of all this social magic. (law article, 840)

Bourdieu’s least original point in his analysis of the legal field is that judges’ words have power because they consecrate real mechanisms of force. Judges words are performative acts, in

Austin's sense. But more original and more important is Bourdieu's suggestion that judicial discourse is performative only after some aspect of social reality is established which it then reflects. More generally, any form of "prophetic proclamation," Bourdieu is suggesting, must reflect extant "social divisions and distributions" in order to impose itself affectively on the social world. This is a puzzling passage because Bourdieu suggests in a determinist sense that "prophetic proclamations" are mere "recording secretaries" to history. And yet he is trying to explain the ostensibly "magical" effects of these proclamations on real-world actions and practices. Surely he believes that the legal field – "the canonical form of all this social magic" – affects practices on account of its realist nominalism. For better or worse, the law has power.<sup>101</sup> The question I put to Bourdieu, then, is how realist nominalism may be put to work in service of normative social theory.

Bourdieu constantly describes himself as committed to the ideals of science, universality and rationality. But he also describes himself as an advocate of "the logical Realpolitik" of science, universality and rationality. That is, Bourdieu advocates the study of the sociology – in his sense of the term – of those social fields interested in the creation of scientific ideals, universal goods and rational conditions of dialogue. In general, the academy represents the most prominent social field interested in these ideals. Bourdieu's studies of academia are aimed, then, at uncovering the stakes inherent in the academic social field which produce interest in the ideals of science, universality and rationality. This task exemplifies self-reflexivity in social science because Bourdieu himself professes to be at bottom interested in creating social conditions which promote science, universal goods and rationality. In other words, Bourdieu is working to expose his own "epistemic unconscious."

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<sup>101</sup> I say "for better or worse" only because the passage cited is part of Bourdieu's larger argument about the law and its relationship to symbolic domination and injustice. I do not mean to suggest that the law having power is a bad thing.



Critics of Bourdieu worry that his account of self-reflexivity is a failed means to put social theory on par with the neutrality of the natural sciences.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, Bourdieu does sometimes suggest that the practice of self-reflexivity warrants neutral and objective social science.<sup>103</sup> But Bourdieu uses the term “objectivity” in a different sense as well. On the one hand, self-reflexivity is meant to warrant Bourdieu’s claim that sociology is a rigorous science, one that makes empirically verifiable claims about objective in-the-world facts. This claim, I believe, is doubtful, though I will not spend time arguing for this view.

On the other hand – and more interesting and relevant to my purposes – self-reflexivity denotes a model of critical self-reflection that turns the social conditions – in the form of social fields – which produce objects of study themselves into objects of study. In other words, the study of the social conditions of the production of higher-order knowledge takes as its object the second-order social position of the reflective theorist. This is what I believe Bourdieu means when he claims that self-reflexivity objectifies the structures of scientific objectivity. (2001, 5) It creates objects for study out of the perceptions social theorists must take for granted in order to do social theory. Self-reflexivity attempts to uncover these opaque gestures and skills embodied in the scientific *doxa*, as well as the social, historical and institutional conditions to which they are a learned response. “The unanalyzed element in every theoretical analysis (whether subjectivist or objectivist),” Bourdieu writes, “is the theorist’s subjective relation to the social world and the objective (social) relation presupposed by this subjective relation.” (1990, *Logic*, 29) He elaborates on what it means to study – i.e. “objectify” – those aspects of practice which must ordinarily be taken for granted:

Social science must not only, as objectivism would have it, break with native experience and the native representation of that experience, but also, by a second break, call into

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<sup>102</sup> See, for example, Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1999

<sup>103</sup> See Chapter Three for more about Bourdieu’s concept of objectivity. In short, I argue that Bourdieu’s two senses of the “field” warrant an account of objective or material social structure. However, this fact tells us little about the neutrality of Bourdieu’s view.

question the presuppositions inherent in the position of the ‘objective’ observer who, seeking to interpret practices, tends to bring into the object the principles of his relation to the object, as is shown for example by the privileged status he gives to communicative and epistemic functions, which inclines him to reduce exchanges to pure symbolic exchanges. Knowledge does not only depend as an elementary relativism suggests, on the particular viewpoint that a ‘situated and dated’ observer takes up vis-à-vis the object. A much more fundamental alternation – and a much more pernicious one, because, being constitutive of the operation of knowing, it inevitably remains unnoticed – is performed on practice by the sheer fact of taking up a ‘viewpoint’ on it and so constituting it as an object (of observation and analysis). (1990, *Logic*, 27)

Bourdieu’s own corpus is an expression of the task of self-reflexivity. For example, his studies of Kabyle marriage practices, his examinations of the scholastic and philosophical fields, and his analysis of masculinity are all explorations of the fields in which he was a personal member but also upon which he took up an observer’s perspective. In each case, Bourdieu attempts to uncover the assumptions, perceptions, tastes, positions, gestures, etc that one must assume in order to become a member in a social field, the sum of which comprises that field’s *doxa*. So, in the field of philosophy, for example, understanding the relevant *doxa* entails learning a certain way of writing, having a grasp of which kinds of texts are to be taken seriously and which aren’t, comporting one’s bearing and posture in the right ways (as determined by the status of the person with whom one is speaking), etc.

I have called Bourdieu’s method indirect as compared with Dewey’s and this is because one can only promote rational dialogue, Bourdieu believes, by exposing the historical foundations and social history of one’s own categories of thought (which are manifested in a social field’s *doxa*). One cannot simply account for one’s own categories of thought *as* categories of thought. Self-reflexive social science therefore works in an opposite direction compared with Dewey: where Dewey approaches the relationship between ordinary intelligent action and second-order theory-making by focusing on the revision of “moral” concepts, Bourdieu proceeds from a study of existing social conditions to the *habitus* and *doxa* of a given social theory which those conditions produce. This task is self-reflexive, then, in Bourdieu’s sense, because it elucidates

the mechanisms of the production of higher-order knowledge, in particular the very sociology of which he is the author.

The central value of self-reflexivity is that it offers a model of self-reflection and critical reflective practice that does not rest satisfied with the recovery of one's own thoughts and representations. Instead, it attempts to affect social conditions by exposing the ways that they produce the operative concepts with which one is operating as a social theorist. The purpose of self-reflexivity is not only to elucidate the *doxa* of one's own social field for understanding's sake, but also to help the social theorist achieve her normative goals. "The logical Realpolitik of which I am a ceaseless advocate," Bourdieu writes, "must above all have as its aim an intention to work towards the creation of social conditions permitting rational dialogue," he writes. (1999, 226-227) Attempting to achieve reflexive mastery of the individual and collective history of the effects on thought and action of the social field in which one is acting as a member, as Bourdieu puts it, is a normative and pragmatic task. (2000, 107) It is central to all of Bourdieu's arguments that studying the stakes inherent in social fields will enable social theorists to change those fields more effectively.

But how? The central claim of self-reflexive social science is that the subordination of intellectual activity to sociological investigation helps social theorists to define and effectuate the possible ends and means of their own forms of collective action. The purport of this claim is that self-reflexivity uncovers the involvement – and sometimes the complicity – of intellectuals in the very social practices which they seek to change. This act of discovery, Bourdieu believes, ultimately facilitates social change. Bourdieu focuses on this claim in his book on the sexual structures of social division. *Masculine Domination* is a perhaps paradoxical attempt to scientifically analyze the processes of sexual domination inherent in the very ideals of scientific objectivity. I will briefly describe Bourdieu's argument and try to identify what it offers in service of creating effective normative social theories.

In *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu studies the *doxa* of masculinity and femininity, or what he calls the “somatization of the social relations of domination.” (2001, 23) As per usual, this work focuses on the unconscious schemata of perception inscribed in gendered bodies and the social conditions of production of those schemata. Bourdieu describes the “apprenticeship” between embodied actors and gendered social roles, which “is all the more effective because it remains essentially tacit: femininity is imposed for the most part through an unremitting discipline that concerns every part of the body and is continuously recalled through the constraints of clothing or hairstyle.” He continues, “the antagonistic principles of male and female identity are thus laid down in the form of permanent stances, gaits and postures which are the realization, or rather, the naturalization of an ethic.” (2001, 27) This ethic, which creates and sustains the structure of sexual division, in Bourdieu’s sense,<sup>104</sup> has become “dehistoricized” and “eternalized.” (2001, viii) As such, it operates unseen in important and perhaps unexpected facets of modern societies.

One such place where the structure of sexual division operates unseen, with important consequences for Bourdieu’s own project, is in the very process of scientific inquiry. When social theorists, Bourdieu included, try to understand masculine domination, they do so using modes of thought that are the product of masculine domination. (2001, 5) The homologous application of adjectives used to describe both the differences between the so-called “hard sciences” (physics, chemistry, etc) and the “soft sciences” (sociology, psychology, etc) and the differences between ideal male bodies (strong, hard, etc) and ideal female bodies (supple, soft, etc.) is one example Bourdieu offers among many. In *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu is more interested in describing the phenomenology of the structure of sexual division than he is in explaining its causal microprocesses. As I have argued in previous chapters, these microprocesses can be located in the embodied dispositions of social actors, dispositions which

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<sup>104</sup> See Chapter Three for a discussion of Bourdieu’s understanding of division, or distinction, in the social world.

are transposable in the form of *habitus* from one social field – for example, the field of sexual relations – to another social field – for example, the scientific field. I raise this example now to suggest that Bourdieu is particularly interested in the presence of the structure of sexual division in the scientific field because he is attempting to uncover self-reflexively the social conditions of production of his own scientific ideals. And doing so, he believes, will enable him to more successfully achieve those ideals, which include affecting the forms of practice under discussion.

Bourdieu's interest in the naturalization of the ethic(s) of masculinity is meant to mark an advance in the "order of knowledge" which can be the basis of an advance in the "order of action." (2001, vii-viii) Self-reflexivity is meant to simultaneously *strengthen* the ideal of scientific knowledge which guides Bourdieu's inquiry into the social structure of sexual division *and* uncover the social conditions of production of that ideal. More specifically, self-reflexivity strengthens the ideals of the scientific process as Bourdieu conceives it by uncovering their origin, location and consequences in the world of social practice. By origin, I mean the social history of a social field – like the academic field – and its historical role in the divisions and distributions of the social world. Toward this end, for example, one might consider the history of the participation of the academy in the production and maintenance of racial or gender distributions. By location, I mean the current status of the social theorist in social space. On this axis, one might consider the various privileges afforded to intellectuals and the attendant effects those privileges have on the principles with which they operate. Finally, by consequences, I mean the real-world effects of academic production on policies, practices, discourse, etc, in short, on whatever aspect of practice social theorists intend to effect. Bourdieu's core claim is that the reflexive study of normative theory's ideals – its origin, location and consequences in the social world – does not undermine, but rather strengthens, those ideals.

I have defined normative social theory as any account of social action which intends to have some effect on practice. Bourdieu defines the intellectual in similar terms. She is "a writer, an artist, a scientist, who, strengthened by the competence and the authority acquired in his [or

her] field, intervenes in the political arena.”<sup>105</sup> (2002, 3) Like his account of self-reflexivity, which strengthens the ideals of normative theory by undermining the illusion that those ideals are independent of the social world, Bourdieu’s definition of the intellectual intentionally creates the impression of being paradoxical. On Bourdieu’s lights, the intellectual is a purist who nonetheless commits herself to affecting practice. (2002, 3) Or, to put that more provocatively: the intellectual is a purist who commits herself to affecting practice on account of the merits of her commitment to scientific purity. I interpret Bourdieu to mean purity simply in the sense of a commitment to the ideals which structure one’s field of inquiry (i.e. to the *doxa* of one’s field). Thus, as a social scientist, Bourdieu is “purely” committed to the ideals of scientific objectivity and rational discourse. Given all of the ways that self-reflexivity uncovers the social origin, location and consequences of these ideals, it is remarkable that Bourdieu maintains his commitment to them. He does so, however, because he believes that they legitimize and facilitate his and other social theorists’ practical interventions in the social world.

Bourdieu believes that the intellectual is an historical invention. Indeed, it would seem impossible not to think so after subjecting the intellectual to the self-reflexive study of her social conditions of production as Bourdieu has. But the intellectual is an historical invention with great practical value, he argues. She acts as a defender of the values of universality, transcendence and ideality in the polis. (2002, 3) She is capable of doing so for two reasons: first, these values are embedded as stakes in the *doxa* of the academic social field; second, the intellectual is capable of self-reflexively recognizing the privileges inherent in the claim to universality, which Bourdieu calls the *skholé*, or the leisure required to step back from the social world in order to contemplate it. The intellectual is therefore capable of fighting for the universalization of the conditions of this privilege. (1991, 669)

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<sup>105</sup> One might notice that Bourdieu continues to use the masculine pronoun in most of his writing. Inasmuch as this is indicative of an aspect, however trivial, of masculine domination perpetuated in Bourdieu’s own thought, it is worth noting that he takes this fact to be proof of the validity of his own theory. To think that an intellectual can rid him or herself from the schemata, embodied in habitus, of masculine domination simply by the fiat of his or her intellect is to fall prey to intellectualism.

Self-reflexivity, nominalist realism and what Bourdieu calls the “bi-dimensional” nature of the intellectual (1991, 656) all point to the same claim. It is that theoretical, higher-order accounts of social action, which aspire to affect practice, must do so by *reinforcing* their own ideals through self-reflexivity. We must support both dimensions of social theory in order to facilitate its pragmatic effectiveness, Bourdieu believes. We must support the autonomy from practice which is inevitably the result of reflecting on it and we must support the commitment to affect practice which is emblematic of the intellectual. “To reinforce autonomy by all means,” Bourdieu writes, “is not necessarily to remain in the Ivory Tower . . .” (2002, 4) This conception of normative social theory avoids two less attractive interpretations. On the one hand, it avoids the illusion of Gramsci’s organic intellectual, whose commitment to acting as the voice of the proletariat blinds her to the social distinctions inherent in being an intellectual. (1991, 668) On the other hand, it avoids the nominalist or scholastic illusion that Bourdieu associates with the “postmodern” attempt to overcome “dualisms” in thought about, for example, gender:

These dualisms, deeply rooted in things (structures) and in bodies, do not spring from a simple effect of verbal naming and cannot be abolished by an act of performative magic, since the genders, far from being simple ‘roles’ that can be played at will (in the manner of ‘drag queens’), are inscribed in bodies and in a universe from which they derive their strength. It is the order of genders that underlies the performative efficacy of words – and especially of insults – and it is also the order of genders that *resists* the spuriously revolutionary redefinitions of subversive voluntarism. (2001, 103)

Self-reflexivity results instead in what Bourdieu repeatedly calls the “*Realpolitik* of the universal.” The detachment of theory from practice can then be overcome by recognizing, supporting and utilizing the specific practices inherent to theory. Those practices are staked in the values of universality, transcendence, ideality and rationality, or what Bourdieu in a gentler tone simply calls practical reason and prudence.<sup>106</sup> (2000, 80-81) In all cases, the task as Bourdieu sees it is to defend the “specific reasons of practical reason” without falling into the

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<sup>106</sup> Bourdieu does not mean practical reason in the technical sense. He means something much closer to Aristotelian *phronesis*. (2000, 81)

scholastic illusion which is blind to the social conditions of reflection or into the populist exaltations of practice which are also blind to the social conditions of reflection. (2000, 81)

In passing, Bourdieu cites Dewey's concept of intelligence as support for the claim that the bi-dimensional nature of normative social theory must be reinforced in order to overcome the detachment of theory from practice. Dewey is rightly concerned with finding ways to support healthy forms of practice with intelligent uses of reflection, Bourdieu suggests. The concept of self-reflexivity challenges but also substantiates Dewey's interest in the reformulation of the operative concepts of social theories. Self-reflexivity suggests reasons for which and means by which theoretical concepts can be evaluated; these are reasons and means which go far beyond the theorist's subjective representation to herself of her work. These reasons and means, I suggest, move normative theory closer to solving the problem of detachment I described with respect to normative legal theories. This discussion has come a long way from the concerns outlined earlier about legal adjudication. But not so far, I hope, that the commitment to creating a more effective and powerful relationship between higher-order accounts of social action and ordinary actions and practices cannot be seen.



## Online Actions and Practices

“Millions of young girls and hundreds of thousands of young men,” the journal *The Hour* shrieked, “are *novelized* into absolute idiocy. Novel-readers are like opium-smokers; the more they have of it the more they want of it, and the publishers . . . go on . . . making fortunes out of this corruption.”

--- Mark Poster, *Information Please*, 139

My goal in this chapter is to extend my arguments about social action to the study of *new* social practices, particularly those which are difficult to understand using established explanatory and normative concepts. I will use the internet as a case study and will consider several instances where online social practices raise challenging questions for accounts of social action. Each of these issues leads to questions having to do with the practical understanding of online social actors and the potentially intelligent social practices they create. As the epigraph above suggests, new modes of communications are often perceived to be profoundly disruptive to foregoing ways of life. The kinds of disruptions which ensue, and whether they are for the better or worse, are often unpredictable. My purpose in this chapter is to evaluate some of the more prominent attempts to understand the transformations our society is currently undergoing due to the rapid spread of online networks. It is my contention that this can be done by considering those online networks as contributing to the creation of intelligent social practices grounded in the practical understanding of social actors.

Many of the central issues I will consider in this chapter – both positive and negative – are captured by Yochai Benkler, in his book *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. I will discuss Benkler’s arguments throughout this chapter, often by contrasting them with far more pessimistic assessments of the internet made by Dreyfus and others. Summarizing his basic contention, Benkler writes:

We are in the midst of a quite basic transformation in how we perceive the world around us, and how we act, along and in concert with others, to shape our own understanding of the world we occupy and that of others with whom we share it. Patterns of social practice, long suppressed as economic activities in the context of industrial economy, have now emerged to greater importance than they have had in a century and a half. With them, they bring the possibility of genuine gains in the very core of liberal commitments, in both advanced countries and around the globe. (2006, 472)

Although supportive of much of what he says, I will be critical of Benkler’s description of the basic transformations in how we perceive the world around us and in how we act in it due to the advent of online networks. I will be critical in particular of Benkler’s individualist framework of social explanation. This critique represents one of two central concerns I have about problematic modes of assessing the internet’s effects on social actions and practices. The first stems from my arguments about individual social action in Chapter Two, in particular my arguments against explanatory reductionism to the intentional psychology of social actors. Arguments of this sort are related to Benkler’s economic and political commitments. I will argue that they lead him to ignore the “strong” sources of intelligence that may develop in conjunction with online activities. I will discuss what I mean by “strong” sources of intelligence momentarily.

Benkler is quite right about the profundity of the transformation we are currently undergoing and my goal is to improve upon his evaluation of online social practices by considering their relationship to ordinary intelligent action. I wish to do so, however, without overestimating the nature of the social transformations at stake. This is the mistake of a second general stream of thought in vogue today about the relationship between the internet and society.

Too many studies of the internet, to put it plainly, proceed from ambiguously formed assumptions that online networks “change everything.” Normative assessments of the internet often begin with vague concerns about what might happen when social actors begin to “live their lives” online. Dreyfus, for example, constructs many of his arguments against red herrings like the long forgotten “Extropians,” who suggested that the internet presents a wholesale replacement to the physical world. (2001, *OTI*, 5) I am also not at all convinced by authors, such as Mark Poster, who believe that, due to the advent of the internet, “the word *world* must be given a new sense . . .” (2006, 53) I am not engaged, as he is, in the project of defining a “post-anthropology of the human-machine interface.” (2006, 56-7) Accounts of this sort rarely illustrate any of the microprocesses of the social actions and practices they propose to study. Furthermore, the worrisome history of what David Gunkel calls “frontier rhetoric” (2001, 45-6) about the so-called new worlds created by technology is another reason to keep accounts of online social action away from “post-anthropologies.” Given the ways in which this kind of frontier rhetoric has, for example, been used to justify colonial practices, it is better to avoid such hype and to focus instead on particular pressing issues facing users of the internet.

I hope to give an account of online social action which recognizes the profound effect technologically mediated actions may have on the creation and perpetuation of intelligent social practices, but to do so without slipping into overblown and utopian rhetoric. I will do so in three main stages.<sup>107</sup> The argument of each section builds upon the previous section. However, each section also comprises a somewhat freestanding assessment of theoretical approaches to the study of the internet. In each case, I consider a theory’s utilization of or blindness to the concept of ordinary practical sense. Overall, I argue that the theoretical study of the forms of practical sense involved with online social action helps those accounts to avoid becoming detached from new forms of social practice and to become efficaciously engaged in them as well.

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<sup>107</sup> This chapter actually has four sections. However, the middle two – “Community and Propinquity” and “The Poverty of Networks?” – discuss contrasting views of the same topic, namely, the effect of online practices on community life.

First, I will discuss legal and common conceptions of property as they relate to new online social practices. I will describe a problematic disequilibrium as I and others see it between traditional conceptions of property and new forms of practice. This problem calls for what, in the previous chapter, I called concept reformulation. In Chapter Five I argued that the reformulation of the operative concepts of our social theories is an important task, but that it must be supplemented by the self-reflexive study of the social fields within which our social theories are produced. In the second section of this chapter, then, I will attempt to show how normative assessments of online practices must study the production of practical sense in new fields of online social practice. I will do so by discussing two competing assessments of the value of online practices for the health of community life: first, Benkler's optimistic assessment of the "wealth" of networks; second, Dreyfus' pessimistic assessment of nihilism in the online public sphere. Dreyfus' pessimism is derived from arguments about the effects of online practices on the sources of what he calls social meaning. He is right to focus on this relationship, I will argue, but wrong to think that the internet intrinsically undermines meaning in social life. The final section of this chapter suggests ways in which online practices may in fact be generating new forms of meaning and intelligence in social life. I will discuss systems of online information retrieval – such as Google and Wikipedia – and the changes they promote in our conceptions of knowledge and information.

*Old Laws and New Practices: Copyright and Propriety*

David Weinberger argues that we need new metaphors to help us understand the internet. Rather than talk about pipes, scarcity, property, etc, he argues, we must find ways to talk which

are derived from the unique characteristics of online networks.<sup>108</sup> “Not who owns spectrum,” he writes, “but whether we even need a handshaking ‘etiquette’ to allow devices to communicate wirelessly . . . Not whether this megacorp should be allowed to own that particular station in some specific city . . . but how can we turn an audience into a conversation? . . . Not how scarce is bandwidth . . . but what can we best do with the abundance?” (2008, 446-447) Weinberger’s concern is that foregoing ways of understanding online networks (amongst academics and non-academics alike) are detached from the autochthonous intelligence of the practices which are evolving online. Lawrence Lessig also believes that we need new metaphors about the internet. He develops this claim with respect to the relationship between copyright law and online practices. Lessig’s account outlines one of the central problems facing the study of new forms of social action. As I argued in Chapter Five, theoretical accounts of social action have a problematic tendency to lag behind the intelligence of the practices they intend to explain, interpret or affect. This tendency is all the more pronounced with new and unpredictable social actions and practices.

Lessig – and Benkler to some extent as well – describe a disequilibrium between property law and online practices. This account of disequilibrium is not unlike the sense of detachment Dewey attributed to romantic forms of individualism derived from the bygone frontier spirit of the 19th century. In both cases, the issue of concern is the inheritance of operative concepts – operative, that is, in our social theories, our cultural ideals and our laws – and their application to new social practices. Lessig introduces his arguments about the internet using a familiar framework:

A time is marked not so much by ideas that are argued about as by ideas that are taken for granted. The character of an era hangs upon what needs no defense. Power runs with

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<sup>108</sup> Failures to follow Weinberger’s advice can lead to farcical consequences. Recall Senator Ted Stevens’ (R-Alaska) groping and much maligned attempt to describe the internet as “a series of tubes.” Tellingly, Senator Stevens was chairman of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, the committee responsible for regulating the internet.

ideas that only the crazy would draw into doubt. The 'taken for granted' is the test of sanity; 'what everyone knows' is the line between us and them. This means that sometimes a society gets stuck. (2001, 5)

Lessig's concern about disequilibrium between ideas and practices, with respect to new online social practices, has been studied by others from a number of related angles. Poster, for example, argues that "virtual" social practices do not fit into existing ethical concepts. (2006, 141) He cites online pedophilia as an example, noting that chat rooms and social networking websites provide forums for actions the ethical (and legal) evaluation of which is ambiguous or even incoherent on the lights of inherited ethical concepts. (2006, 150) Evaluations of the requirements of propinquity for genuine community life – an issue about which I will have more to say soon – similarly lead to important questions about the relationship between new social practices and the operative concepts of our social theories.

Lessig's central concern focuses on how "issues about innovation and creativity get shoehorned into the political divide of the last generation." (2001, xvii) He evaluates this act of shoehorning with respect to copyright law as it applies to the creation and legal status of online content and programming source codes. The background against which much of this discussion occurs is the ongoing strengthening of copyright protections by the United State Congress. In the 1970s, and again in the 1990s (with the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998), Congress vastly expanded copyright protections. The understanding of property grounding these extensions of copyright law to online content and code is, to Lessig's mind, deeply problematic. I will describe the core concerns of this issue in order to flesh out what I mean by the detachment of social theories from intelligent practices as it pertains to the internet.

Copyright law has received notable theoretical attention recently due to the ambiguous proprietary status of online content and code. Lawsuits aimed at music downloading websites such as Napster and video clearinghouse websites such as Youtube have become prominent

litmus tests for the application of existing copyright laws to producers of online content. The proprietary and nonproprietary development of source codes has surfaced and the legal status of the “open code” movement has come into question.<sup>109</sup> These cases raise the question of the appropriate level of control owners and creators ought to exercise over online content and code through the exercise of copyright. To answer this question, one must consider the purpose of copyright controls in general and the kinds of goods to which they traditionally apply.

A common way to parse goods appropriate for copyright protection from other kinds of cultural objects is by considering whether those goods are rivalrous or nonrivalrous. Rivalrous goods are those that are subject to competition; they are finite and depleted by use. The grass grazed upon by cattle on public lands is a standard example of a rivalrous good. The “tragedy of the commons” is the result of overusing – or “overgrazing” – a rivalrous good. One way to understand the purpose of copyright is that it protects creators of unique cultural entities from “overgrazing.” When an author publishes a book, she is meant to maintain control over who copies that book and the uses to which those copies are put. Unlicensed reproduction would threaten the author’s ability to earn a living by writing books, in turn “depleting” the value of her creation.

On this picture, nonrivalrous entities – such as scientific theories, which are not understood to be depleted, but rather, enhanced, by common use – are not subject to copyright protections. Lessig argues, however, that the very distinction between rivalrous and nonrivalrous goods obscures a central point about our understanding of the nature of property. The reason that nobody needs permission from Einstein’s estate in order to use the theory of general relativity, Lessig argues, is not because Einstein’s idea is simply nonrivalrous. It is, instead, that free resources are generally needed for innovation and creativity, and that our society has decided that the theory of general relativity contributes to innovation and creativity more as a free resource than as a controlled resource. (2001, 14) Einstein’s theory exists in “The Commons,” according

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<sup>109</sup> See below for more detail about the “open code” movement.

to Lessig. Goods held in common are those which we have determined best contribute to social purposes when left free from control, copyright or otherwise. Public streets, parks, beaches, scientific insights and texts left in the public domain are examples of goods we have largely determined ought to remain in The Commons. (2001, 20) This model for the application of copyright does not leave the distinction between rivalrous and nonrivalrous goods entirely behind. It is meant to explain why we distinguish between them in the first place. Rivalrous goods are those the protection of which we think will best benefit a community; nonrivalrous goods are those the freedom of which we think will best benefit a community.

On these lights, the character of a resource and how it relates to a community determines whether that resource is subject to copyright protection, Lessig argues. (2001, 21) And what is unique about the internet is that its particular characteristics largely resist the need for copyright protection.<sup>110</sup> Better than any other modern phenomenon, Lessig believes, the internet demonstrates the value of free resources. (2001, 15) He cites the legal scholar Carol Rose, who argues that there are two central reasons generally why we keep a resource free from control: first, it is physically capable of monopolization, and second, it is most valuable when used by an indefinite and unlimited number of people. (2001, 87) Lessig stresses the point that increased participation enhances the social value of the internet. (2001, 88) Online social practices, Lessig claims, produce an “innovation commons” in both creative content and for the operative source codes on which the internet runs. (2001, 23) Online innovation *increases*, in other words, with freedom from copyright protection. On this reading, the internet is an “inverse commons,” Eric Raymond writes, where “the grass grows taller if it’s grazed on.” (quoted in Lessig, 2001, 68)

The internet is particularly ill-suited to copyright control, furthermore, because its content is largely free from the physical constraints of other forms of property. This returns the point to

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<sup>110</sup> Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web protocol, writes, “philosophically, if the Web was to be a universal resource, it had to be able to grow in an unlimited way. Technically, if there was any centralized point of control, it would rapidly become a bottleneck that restricted the Web’s growth, and the Web would never scale up. Its being ‘out of control’ was very important.” (quoted in Lessig, 2001, 37)



the nature of rivalrous and nonrivalrous goods. “Our intuitions about property,” Lessig writes, “and about how best to order society, are intuitions built in a particular physical world. We have learned a great deal about how best to order that world, given the physics, as it were, of that particular world.” (2001, 103) Online content, he goes on to argue, reminiscent of Weinberger’s points which I used to introduce this section of the chapter, is not defined by physical properties. In general, as Benkler writes, the economics of an information economy based in online networks is vastly different from the economics of physical manufacturing (the system from which copyright practices are derived). (2006, 4)

Similarly, the challenge facing the relationship between source codes and propriety is not “overgrazing,” Lessig argues. Empirical examples seem to support his point, the most prominent of which is Linux. Linux is an open source code which runs most email platforms. It was developed collaboratively by thousands of volunteer computer programmers. Linus Torwald, who began the Linux project, developed it with the specific intention to maintain an open platform. Torwald’s singular legal stipulation to the volunteer programmers who ultimately would become responsible for the program’s development was that they could not legally prevent the next programmer from modifying or improving upon her own additions. Similarly, TCP/IP (the public domain protocols that define the internet) is a collection of code built outside the proprietary model. (Lessig, 2001, 56) What we learn from Linux and TCP/IP is that non-proprietary strategies seem particularly well-suited for online practices.

Lessig’s central point is that the foregoing ideas about copyright derived from the last century – most importantly, that copyright protects and encourages innovation and creativity – are losing their hold in the reality of (some of) our new social practices. His goal is not to argue against the idea of copyright control as such. It is, instead, to argue against the intuition that if some control is good, more is better. (2001, 72) The problem he sees is that the evaluative concepts guiding the creation and adjudication of laws having to do with the internet are holding back its creative and innovative potential. We are failing to see past older business and legal

models inherited from past times. As Tapscott and Williams write, “holding back technology to preserve broken business models is like allowing blacksmiths to veto the internal combustion engine in order to protect their horseshoes.” (2006, 275)

Lessig utilizes a useful model developed by Benkler for the analysis of any communications technology in order to show that existing online innovations have largely arisen from just those aspects of the internet which have been left free from control. The internet, like radio and television technologies before it, is comprised of a physical layer (computers, wires, etc), a logical or code layer (software), and, finally, a content layer. The point of dividing the internet up this way is to show how each layer can be controlled or free independently of the others. (2001, 23) In the 1990s, for example, while the physical layer was controlled by copyright protection, the logical and content layers were largely free. Lessig describes two main models for the organization of a communications network: first, the model most closely associated with cable television, which perfectly controls the physical, logical, and content layers; second, the internet of the 1990s, which enabled free exchange of content over mostly open-code software. (2001, 167) It should not be surprising that Lessig and Benkler value the cultural contributions of the internet high above those made by cable television. I will have more to say about why in the next section. It suffices to suggest here, though, that on Lessig’s lights, whatever innovation and creativity is in fact spawned by the internet relies quite heavily upon its freedom from excessive copyright controls at the code and content layers.

The internet model is structured by what’s called an “end-to-end” architecture, and utilizing the value of the internet requires maintaining the fidelity of this architecture. In an end-to-end network, the “intelligent” aspects of the network are at the ends, in the applications to which the network is put by users. An end-to-end network is a “stupid” network, in the sense that the network itself exercises little or no influence over content. An electricity grid is an end-to-

end network; so too are roads.<sup>111</sup> (2001, 39) Lessig's central claim about the internet is that continuing to allow it to operate as a stupid network supports the most innovation and creative activity. (2001, 38) Maintaining its end-to-end architecture allows the internet to be an innovation commons, where people can deploy new applications of the technology without needing anyone's permission.<sup>112</sup> (2001, 40)

My purpose here in outlining Lessig's argument about copyright and online practices is to show how new intelligent social practices demand changes to our familiar evaluative concepts. Copyright is one of those concepts. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act, which strengthened copyright protections in a number of ways, is a blunt and backward-looking response to innovative technologies which challenge old assumptions in useful ways, according to Lessig. The music file sharing service Napster, for example, did indeed represent a threat to recording companies. But to see the new social practice Napster helped create only in this light is to deny much of its importance. Lessig writes:

To the extent you view Napster as nothing more than a device for facilitating the theft of content, there is little usefulness in this new mode of distribution. But the extraordinary feature of Napster was not so much the ability to steal content as it is the range of content that Napster makes available. The important fact is not that a user can get Madonna's latest songs for free; it is that one can *find* a recording of New Orleans jazz drummer Jason Marsalis's band playing "There's a Thing Called Rhythm." (2001, 131)

The fear Lessig expresses about the stifling extension of old concepts to new practices has precedent in the history of communications. The social practices enabled by the invention and proliferation of the radio fit in to the basic legal and evaluative concepts of the 1920s in

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<sup>111</sup> Of course, both electricity grids and roads do influence their own uses. I cannot run just anything on a standard 120 volt electrical outlet and I cannot drive a scooter or a monster truck on most roads. However, these limitations are due to the physical constraints of electricity grids and roads. There are far fewer physical constraints inherent to online networks which would influence their use.

<sup>112</sup> Lessig offers three reasons for this claim. First, because programs run on computers at the ends of the network, innovators need only connect to the network in order to contribute to it. Second, because the network is not designed around any particular intelligence, it is therefore open to unpredictable innovation. The network is open to unforeseen innovations, in other words. Third, because the architecture of end-to-end is neutral with respect to content, it cannot discriminate against an innovation that threatens established sources of influence or power. (2001, 36-37)

ambiguous ways. In his account of the history and creation of the American media, Paul Starr describes what he calls the “constitutive choices” and “constitutive moments” in the history of communications technologies. Such choices and moments are those when the design and rules of operation for a technical system are made. Starr’s premise, perhaps contrary to Lessig’s, is that the architecture of technical systems is rarely clear enough to compel a single constitutive design. (2004, 1) Parallel to Lessig, however, Starr is concerned about those mechanisms of “entrenchment” which make it exceedingly difficult to revise or revoke the constitutive political, institutional and economic choices which determine the fate of a communications technology. (2004, 4) These mechanisms are hard to see outside of their historical context. With the advent of radio it was unclear, for example, whether broadcasters would be understood to be part of the press at all and thus extended the same First Amendment protections enjoyed by the print media. Alternately, it was unclear if the radio was to be an entertainment medium and thus subject to state censorship. Or yet again, Starr points out, it was possible that the radio would be understood to be a common carrier like telephone and telegraph companies, which would in turn imply that radio stations were required to provide equal access to potential speakers. “Each paradigm,” Starr writes, “press, entertainment, common carrier – brought with it a different body of legal understandings.” (2004, 329) I might add to Starr’s assessment that each paradigm brought with it different theoretical, popular and practical schemata of understanding as well.

Lessig’s fear is that the wrong understanding will become entrenched if old concepts are used to evaluate new practices. Apropos of Starr’s discussion of the radio, Lessig makes the point that we must cease to interpret the internet in terms inherited from our understanding of broadcast spectrum. The two most current mainstream options under consideration for the regulation of the internet are both derived from the nature of the radio. They are the idea that spectrum ought to be controlled by the government directly or that it ought to be allocated into property and auctioned to the highest bidder. Neither of these regimes works for the internet, Lessig believes. (2001, 75) Because of the technical capacities of online networks, unlike

broadcast spectrum, many devices can share the resources of a single network at once. This means that some of the central problems – and solutions – endemic to broadcast technology are simply moot. We therefore need new concepts of control for online networks, Lessig argues. (2001, 77) Otherwise, “by selling [control of internet protocols] now,” Lessig writes, “before alternative uses can be developed, we create a world where the resources for these new alternatives are held by those *with the strongest incentives to stop them.*” (2001, 226)

As David Reed puts it, “[we are] grounded in theory or common sense [about spectrum] that does not match the phenomena we are seeing every day.” (quoted in Lessig, 2001, 77) When we fail to see this, the potential intelligence of new social practices may be obscured. Radio perhaps provides another relevant example. Lessig notes that from 1927-1934 the radio went from having a collection of uses – some commercial, most not (e.g. religious, educational, etc) – to a situation in the mid-1930s in which NBC and CBS accounted for 97% of nighttime broadcasting. (2001, 74) One obvious lesson here may be about corporate control of the media and the consequences of monopolies. But a second, and no less important, lesson may be that the innovative and unpredictable nature of some new social practices is vulnerable to domination by older forms of understanding and practice. Lessig’s arguments are all the stronger in light of a new generation of young people who are “growing up digital” in environments permeated by online multimedia technologies.<sup>113</sup> Our social theories ought not to contribute to the bottling up of their creativity in the way that broadcasting companies stifled the diversity of uses to which the radio may have been put. This is not to place the concepts used by social theorists on par with NBC and CBS, but rather only to suggest that social theory be used to overcome rather than strengthen the problem of detachment as I’ve described it.

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<sup>113</sup> See, for example: John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

*Community and Propinquity*

In Chapter Five, I argued for the importance of reformulating the operative concepts of normative social theories in light of the autochthonous intelligence of ordinary social actions and practices. Using Dewey as a voice for this project, I showed why the value of concept reformulation is high. I also attempted to show that Dewey's project is insufficiently suspicious of the capacity of social theorists to reformulate their own expectations, concepts and ideals, in short, their own *doxa*, as Bourdieu puts it. I argued that the task of concept reformulation must be supplemented by self-reflexivity, or the study of the social conditions of production of social theory.

The overwhelming difficulty of getting a strong conceptual grip on the significance of new technologies underscores the insufficiency of concept reformulation as a principle goal of social theory. Nobody knew – and perhaps nobody could have known – the uses to which the radio would be put. My claim in what follows is that the study of the practical sense of internet users can help us to avoid this fate today.

Normative accounts of online social action, both positive and negative, benefit from the study of the reciprocal (or recursive) relationship of online social practices and forms of practical understanding. Online social practices, in other words, have causal effects on new forms of practical understanding; reciprocally, new forms of practical understanding influence what people do online. The fact of this relationship calls for more than new metaphors for understanding the internet. It calls for a specific study of the means by which the effects of online practices on ordinary forms of understanding can be assessed. It also calls for specific study of possible ways to affect online social practices via new ways of understanding them. I mean this call to follow loosely from Bourdieu's notion of nominalist realism and self-reflexivity in social science.

Normative assessments of the internet often rightly focus on the effects of computer-mediated relationships on community life. Some, some as Benkler and Howard Rheingold, argue

that computer-mediated relationships are highly attractive from the perspective of community life. Others, most notably Dreyfus, and more recently, Andrew Keen, argue that the internet signals the death-knell of healthy communities and vibrant public spheres. In what follows, I will consider the core claims of these strongly opposed assessments of the internet's relationship to both community life and to the public sphere. I find some of what both the "boosters" and the "knockers" (to borrow a phrase from Charles Taylor) say to be convincing. However, I find that both the strongly optimistic and strongly pessimistic assessments fail to recognize the reciprocal effects online practices have on ordinary understanding and visa-versa. Benkler's normative assessment of the internet, I will argue, suffers from a failure to recognize the effects of online practices on practical understanding and in turn on social meaning (in Dreyfus' sense). Benkler cannot recognize these effects due to his exclusive focus on the nature of "weak" social ties. I will utilize Dreyfus' argument about the nature of the public sphere in order to make this claim. I will also suggest, however, that Dreyfus goes too far when he argues that the internet intrinsically undermines meaning and intelligence in social life. I will suggest, then, in the final section of this chapter, that some of the ways in which online practices are reshaping practical forms of understanding forces social theorists to reconsider the concepts they use both to explain and assess the internet's value.

Much of the debate about the relationship between the internet and community life centers on the difference between "strong" and "weak" social ties. Strong social ties are those that replicate traditional forms of local, embodied interaction. They involve shared backgrounds, contexts and histories. As Garrison Keillor – the creator of *A Prairie Home Companion*, itself arguably a caricature of strong community ties – says, "it isn't opinions that make people, it's geography." (quoted in Jones, 1997, 16) Keillor appeals to a notion of traditional communities not unlike Ferdinand Tonnies' description of *Gemeinschaft*, or ideal type communities, nor unlike Hegel's depiction of Greek *Sittlichkeit*, or ethical communities. In each of these cases, community is based in sentiment, tradition, common bonds, local soil, extended family, and

holistic social practices. (Driskell, 2002, 378) Weak social ties, by contrast, are limited in duration and intensity and are formed around shared interests and activities. Benkler's claims about the value of the internet are focused almost exclusively on weak social ties, as I will discuss shortly. This focus is derived from Benkler's often tacit individualist model of social explanation.

The nature of online relationships raises the question of whether *Gemeinschaft*-like communities can survive when people increasingly interact over electronic networks. One consensus social theorists interested in online community ties seem to have reached is the idea that the internet, for better or worse, facilitates the creation and ubiquity of weak social ties. Wellman, Benkler, Rheingold, Turkle, Kraut, Castells, Webber, Driskell, and the Pew Internet & American Life Project have all concluded, in related ways, that the internet encourages social actors to create and sustain social ties founded in common interest which are limited in duration and intensity.<sup>114</sup> They speak of the "privatization of sociability" (Castells, 1996) and "community without propinquity." (Webber, 1963) It is important to clarify that these empirical findings suggest nothing, at least explicitly, about the effect of internet practices on strong community ties. Their conclusions are limited to the empirical presence of weak social ties in networked societies. It is also important to distinguish judgment about the *value* of communities structured upon weak social ties from the normatively neutral fact that the internet facilitates their growth, whatever their value. The normative question is the one I want to explore. I do so from the empirical standpoint that these various studies have established.

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<sup>114</sup> The emphasis on weak social ties, both in the literature and in the following discussion, is not meant to suggest that the internet can not also strengthen strong, pre-existing social ties. Robert Kraut concludes, for example, that the internet both facilitates weak social ties as well as promotes a "rich get richer" model of social interaction, according to which social actors with extensive social networks expand those networks online. (2002, 58 and 67) Gutavo Mesch similarly shows, through his own research as well as a review of the relevant literature, that online relationships are rarely maintained only through online connections. Rather, they are maintained through a combination of on and offline interactions. (2003, 339) These empirical findings are important because they suggest that the foregoing normative claims about the value of the internet, which focuses on its promotion of weak social ties (as I will argue momentarily), are not the only kinds of normative claims that could be made.



Benkler puts forward the most detailed and convincing argument for the benefits to communities due to online relationships. The internet not only facilitates weak ties, he argues, but it also increases their prominence and centrality in western liberal societies; in doing so, the internet promotes the central values of those societies. Particularly though what he calls the “peer production” of information, knowledge and culture, the internet opens new platforms for human connection, replacing common background and geographic proximity with ties based on well-defined purposes, Benkler argues. (2006, 375) I will describe Benkler’s central claim, and then discuss what I take to be some of its weaknesses.

The framework within which Benkler constructs his argument is centered upon three main categories which he believes structure the production of information and culture in modern societies. These three categories are the existing stock of nonrival culture and information, the mechanical means of production and reproduction of that stock, and the creativity and communicative capacities needed to transform existing resources into new insights, innovations, symbolic acts, etc. (2006, 52) The transformation our society is currently undergoing has to do with the second of these categories: the mechanical means of production and reproduction of information and culture. According to Benkler, from the industrial era economy of the last century to our information-based economy, one of the most central changes has been that the monetary costs required for the production and reproduction of information have dramatically declined. Cheap processors have significantly undercut the prohibitively large start-up costs associated with the creation and distribution of content in print and broadcast media systems. (2006, 3) The result, Benkler believes, is that the scarce resource upon which the production of information, knowledge and culture pivots has shifted from start-up capital to human capacity itself. (2006, 52)

What’s unique about our current networked information economy, then, is that it brings formerly nonmarket activities that create human capacity – such as friendship, community, hobbies, or common interests – into the center of our economy and of our productive cultural

activities. (2006, 53) “If the networked information economy is indeed a significant inflection point for modern societies,” Benkler writes, “it is so because it upsets the dominance of proprietary, market-based production in the sphere of the production of knowledge, information, and culture.” (2006, 468) Put more simply, Benkler’s claim is that nonmarket activities become vastly more effective and affective than they were before. (2006, 54)

They do so in two central senses. First, the peer production of knowledge, information and culture creates a more participatory culture, in which citizens are not only consumers of information, but creators as well. Lessig calls this a “Read/Write” culture, as opposed to the “Read Only” relationship to the media which dominated in the era of uncontested corporate-controlled media. Attendant to this claim is Benkler’s insistence that the internet aids the creation of a more critical and deliberative culture. Second, nonmarket activities become more effective in the networked information economy in the sense that they become economically sustainable. Online social networking, for example, vastly increases the economic prominence and sustainability of sharing. It is an example of large-scale, cooperative social activity which contributes significantly to the peer production of information, knowledge, and culture. I will describe these two central facets of Benkler’s argument in more detail, starting with his claim about the economic sustainability of networked peer production.

Benkler’s basic claim is premised on the idea that the relative economic role of sharing changes with technology. (2006, 120) This is not to say, he clarifies, that technology determines the level of cooperative activity found in a given society. Rather, technology sets threshold constraints on the effective domain of sharing as a modality of economic production. (2006, 121) Benkler derives this understanding of technology and its relationship to social practices from Barry Wellman’s account of the “affordances” of technology. The claim is that technology creates “feasibility spaces” for social practices. (2006, 31) In other words, “different technologies make different kinds of human action and interaction easier or harder to perform,” Benkler writes. (2006, 17) The internet, therefore, creates more affordances for cooperative social action,

resulting in the peer production of information, knowledge and culture. Benkler cites a number of examples of decentralized, collaborative, nonproprietary and economically sustainable social production, all of which are meant to support his optimistic normative assessment of the internet and its effect on community life.

Free software is perhaps the most prominent example of peer production. Linux is the most prominent example of such software. My earlier discussion of Linux stressed the importance of its “open-source” proprietary structure. Benkler assesses this structure as a model for economic production, one which has begun to pervade not only nonproprietary models of software development but for-profit business models as well. IBM, for example, has been aggressively engaged in adapting its business model to the emergence of free software, Benkler argues, counting on significant revenue streams from what it calls “Linux-related activities.” (2006, 46)

Benkler expands his assessment beyond economic production to include scientific production as well. NASA, for example, created a highly successful “Clickworkers” program, inviting untrained volunteers to help map craters on the moon in their spare time. In the first six months of operation, according to Benkler, the Clickworkers program attracted more than 85,000 visitors who made more than 1.9 million entries. An analysis of the accuracy of their findings showed that the automatically computed consensus of mass aggregates of volunteers was virtually indistinguishable from the inputs of a trained geologist. (Benkler, 2006, 69) “Second Life” and “Massive Multiplayer Online Games” (MMOGs) are similarly developing internal marketplaces through the collaborative peer-produced efforts of participants. Wikipedia (about which I will have more to say shortly), whatever its ultimate value or accuracy, also represents a triumph for collaborative, sharing-based social production. Wikipedia’s mere size attests to the power of peer production. At the time of writing, Wikipedia has over ten million articles in more than 253 languages. In sum, Benkler argues that peer production is the “dark matter” of our economic production universe. It is everywhere but largely unnoticed. (2006, 117)

All of these examples are meant to show that traditional economic assumptions about the dominance of proprietary strategies are overstated in today's technological environment. (2006, 460) This is, perhaps, another instance of the detachment of the operative concepts of social theories from the intelligence of new social practices. Our foregoing theories about effective communication are similarly market-based and proprietary, based on the core notion of a commercial culture populated by consumers. Benkler's second central claim – that the peer production of knowledge, information and culture aids the creation of a participatory and critical culture – is meant to challenge these assumptions. (It is crucial to be clear, however, that Benkler does not challenge the economic model of social action itself. His point is to update our understanding of rationally-minded economic social actors. More on this issue soon.)

Foregoing conceptions of human agency, collective deliberation and common culture are, Benkler argues, embedded in the experience of systems based in capital-intensive information and cultural production. (2006, 462) Due to the availability of cheap processors linked to each other through end-to-end networks, these experiences are changing. Benkler largely understands the internet as an alternative to the mass media, which he believes fails in a number of important ways. Not only are the range of opinions and perspectives available to mass media audiences too narrow, but concentrated ownership of the media gives a small group of people too much power to shape opinions. (2006, 10-11) These are familiar indictments of the corporate-owned media. Benkler's contribution is to show how the internet enables ordinary citizens to be active participants in their culture by comparison. The benefit of that participation is the ostensibly decreased construction of consumers as passive objects of manipulation. (2006, 133) Metaphorically, he suggests that the movie theater model of communications – in which consumers passively absorb images and information – is the one we are beginning to move beyond. (2006, 135)

Benkler offers a number of examples of normatively attractive participatory folk cultures developing online the sum of which he compares favorably to the cultural productions typified by

Hollywood and the recording industry. Examples Benkler cites have to do with the availability of critical and alternative perspectives to ordinary citizens. A young girl searching for “Barbie” on Google, for example, will find on her results page not only a link to Mattel, the maker of Barbie dolls, but also links to AdiosBarbie.com and the Barbie Liberation Organization. (2006, 277) So too does the internet facilitate interactive and critical relationships with current events. Within 18 minutes of the 2005 truck bombings in the London Underground, for example, Wikipedia users had created a page on the subject which acted as a clearinghouse for conflicting news reports. By the end of the day, over 2500 users had created 45 pages of content that was much more detailed than anything provided by a single news outlet. (Tapscott and Williams, 2006, 65) A number of theorists – Poster, for example – have similarly claimed that the internet provides safe spaces for social outcasts, such as homosexual teens in small towns. (2006, 174) All of these examples suggest that the internet makes alternative and critical sources of information and culture available to citizens in new ways. Of course, the availability of critical content does not necessarily create critical or participatory social actors. But studies suggest, perhaps indirectly, that the internet does that too. The Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 57% of American teenagers are “content creators” online, for example. (cited by Tapscott and Williams, 2006, 52) Amitai Etzioni found that internet use significantly decreases the amount of television people watch. (2000, 42)

It is incumbent upon anyone making this argument, still, to suggest *how* people are using the internet. Are they simply watching TV online instead of via cable or broadcast distribution or are they genuinely refiguring the consumer/producer relationship? Benkler cites a detailed case of peer produced collective activism as an example to suggest the latter. His discussion of the Sinclair case is meant to illustrate the claim that the internet encourages social actors to believe that they can make something valuable happen in the world as well as increase the possibility that they will act on that belief. Networked peer production, in other words, “allow[s] a very large number of actors to see themselves as potential contributors to public discourse and as potential

actors in political arenas.” (2006, 220) Should this be the case, Benkler argues, we must conclude that it represents significant qualitative improvements in the condition of human freedom.<sup>115</sup>

(2006, 137)

Prior to the presidential election in 2004, Sinclair, an owner of major television stations in what were considered some of the most important electoral swing states, informed its staff and stations that it planned to preempt the normal broadcasting schedule and air instead a documentary called *Stolen Honor: The Wounds That Never Heal*.<sup>116</sup> The “documentary” was, in short, a strident and spurious attack on John Kerry’s service in the Vietnam War. On October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2004, the *Los Angeles Times* broke the story about Sinclair’s plans and both the Kerry campaign and the Democratic National Committee announced plans to file complaints with the Federal Elections Commission and the Federal Communications Commission. Neither regulatory agency, however, acted or intervened throughout the series of events which finally led to a change in Sinclair’s plans.

Meanwhile, a different kind of response developed in the “blogosphere.” Beginning on the morning of October 9<sup>th</sup>, prominent bloggers on websites such as talkingpointsmemo.com, MyDD.com, and dailyKos.com raised concerns about Sinclair. By mid-day, a “boycott Sinclair” site was established and linked to the blogs. Bloggers provided lists of affiliate Sinclair stations and urged readers to call them and threaten pickets and boycotts. On October 10<sup>th</sup>, in a move which ultimately proved to be pivotal, lists of Sinclair national advertisers were published on dailyKos. Over the next two days, links between blogs and boycott sites proliferated, and by the morning of October 13<sup>th</sup>, the BoycottSBG database contained a list of 800 Sinclair advertisers and provided sample letters for users to send to them.

Two days later, BoycottSBG reported that at least 50 advertisers had pulled ads, and several mainstream media outlets picked up the story. On Monday, October 18<sup>th</sup>, the Sinclair

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<sup>115</sup> I will have more to say about Benkler’s concept of freedom shortly.

<sup>116</sup> Citations for the following account of the actions surrounding the Sinclair case are to Benkler, 2006, 220-223.

stock price dropped eight percent and then fell another six percent the following day. It only began to rise again, later that day, when Sinclair announced that it would not show *Stolen Honor*. This fact does not conclusively prove, of course, that the web-based actions of the previous week forced Sinclair's hand. However, while the reactions to the regulatory and political actions of the Kerry Campaign and the DNC were sluggish at best, the timing of the market response to the web-based actions and Sinclair's quick reversal suggest that the latter was the determining factor.

Benkler draws three conclusions from the Sinclair case. The first is simply about the power of commercial media to exercise inordinate power in politics. (2006, 224) This point is important if only as a background against which the characteristics of online social practices can be compared. Benkler's second point is the most central for my purposes. He writes:

Second, we learn that the new, network-based media can exert a significant counterforce. They offer a completely new and much more widely open intake basin for insight and commentary. The speed with which individuals were able to set up sites to stake out a position, to collect and make available information relevant to a specific matter of public concern, and to provide a platform for others to exchange views about the appropriate political strategy and tactics was completely different from anything that the economics and organizational structure of mass media make feasible. (2006, 224)

This conclusion is key because it is at the center of Benkler's claim that new online social practices are normatively attractive. It is meant to make Benkler's case that the weak community ties based in shared interests that the internet is said to facilitate are beneficial to our society. Benkler's third conclusion, which is apropos of this point, is that the filtration and synthesis of opinions and information in the Sinclair case occurred through online discussion between largely anonymous strangers and that this kind of social interaction produced inclusive and effective collective action. (2006, 224-5)

Benkler lays out a convincing account of the beneficial effects on society of networked social relationships based in weak social ties. He shows that the internet's boon to the creation, maintenance and usefulness of weak social ties has important benefits for modern societies.

These benefits focus on information and communication and the economically sustainable and potentially critical and participatory social practices they encourage. On what understanding of community life, however, are these the most important or noteworthy benefits? Benkler's arguments are focused on the "wealth" of online networks for modern liberal societies. The internet, he believes, provides new possibilities for pursuing core liberal values; in particular, the internet provides new possibilities for pursuing autonomy, political participation, a critical culture, and social justice. (2006, 8) Benkler's commitment to autonomy and its relationship to communication, information, and public reason, as he understands those concepts, will become important in what follows, for, at this point, I would like to suggest that the normative commitments Benkler makes are problematic.

I do not want to quarrel with Benkler on whether the benefits to modern societies of online networks as he sees them are in fact possible. Instead, I want to suggest that the increased presence of weak social ties may also have deleterious effects on community life, effects which Benkler fails to see due to the theoretical insufficiency of his account of the relationship between social practices and practical understanding. I will turn now to Dreyfus' critique of the internet, for he suggests that the weak social ties ostensibly intrinsic to online relationships significantly harm real-life communities. Dreyfus' critique is overstated, I will argue, but it has the benefit of showing why Benkler's exclusive focus on weak community ties obscures important sources of meaning and intelligence in social practice.

### *The Poverty of Networks?*

Dreyfus' worry about the internet predictably focuses on the relationship between knowledge and embodiment. His working assumption is that cyberspace is the land of disembodied knowledge. (2001, *OTI*, 5) As such, Dreyfus often calls cyberspace "Cartesian."



What happens, he asks, if the internet, and the ways of relating to the social world that it promotes, becomes central to the daily lives of social actors? Dreyfus' pessimistic answer is this: in gaining a kind of freedom (from our bodies) when we act and interact online, we lose some of our crucial human capacities. Dreyfus focuses on four of such critical human capacities in particular: our ability to distinguish what is relevant from what is irrelevant, our skill as learners, our grip on reality, and our ability to make genuine commitments, commitments which he takes to be the source of meaning in social life. (2001, *OTI*, 6-7) The first of these capacities leads Dreyfus to critique online systems of information retrieval, a critique which I will discuss in the concluding section of this chapter. Here, I will focus on the last of Dreyfus' arguments, that the internet undermines the ability of ordinary social actors to make genuine commitments and that the internet in turn threatens the creation of meaning in social life. Dreyfus' arguments pertain to the nature of strong social ties, the importance of which Benkler fails to see because he does not recognize the causal relationship between forms of social practice and forms of practical understanding. Dreyfus' argument shows why theoretical study of new forms of social practice must recognize the practical sense of ordinary social actors. And, ultimately, Dreyfus' overstated pessimism shows why social theorists must self-reflexively challenge their own conceptual schemata. In Dreyfus' case, the problematic concept in play is "meaning."

To put it plainly, Dreyfus believes that the internet contributes to the making of a nihilistic culture. He applies Kierkegaard's (and, to a lesser extent, Nietzsche's) arguments about 19<sup>th</sup> century European culture to the study of the relationship between the internet and community life. Succinctly, he introduces his interpretation of their argument:

In the section of *A Literary Review*, written in 1846, entitled 'The Present Age,' Kierkegaard warns that his age is characterized by a disinterested reflection and curiosity that levels all differences of status and value. In his terms, this detached reflection levels all qualitative distinctions. Everything is equal in that nothing matters enough that one would be willing to die for it. Nietzsche gave this modern condition a name; he called it nihilism. (2001, *OTI*, 73)

Dreyfus goes on to suggest that we too are living in a reflective age, one the scale of which Kierkegaard could never have fathomed. Reflective ages, in the Kierkegaardian sense, are passionless and become detached from the sources of meaning in social life. They are implicitly nihilistic in the sense that nothing demands a person's attention or life-structuring commitment over and above her own whim or fancy. A reflective age effaces the qualitative differences between the kinds of life commitments one can make; it is the embodiment of the nihilistic idea, as Kierkegaard put it, according to Dreyfus, that God is equally concerned with the salvation of a sinner and the fall of a sparrow. (2001, *OTI*, 79)

Kierkegaard's worry in *A Literary Review* is that the advent and ubiquity of the press contributed to the reflective quality of his time. Newspapers, journals, cafe culture – all sources of public chatter in Kierkegaard's estimation – produce excessive amounts of knowledge and information, but in doing so they deprive knowledge and information of the existential basis which makes it meaningful. In Dreyfus' terms, what knowledge and information gain in extensity, social life loses in intensity. (2001, *OTI*, 78) Dreyfus' goal is to apply Kierkegaard's central claim – that the press in a reflective age makes life-structuring commitments impossible – to his account of the internet.<sup>117</sup>

The force of Kierkegaard's argument, Dreyfus believes, is found in its extension to considerations about the nature of the public sphere. Dreyfus sets up this claim by contrasting it with Habermas' understanding of the value, and of the decline, of the public sphere. Habermas is a key foil for Dreyfus, because on Habermas' lights, the ideal public sphere is the place, free from politics, where disinterested, nonpartisan, rational reflection takes place. Habermas' goal in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is to describe and explain the beginning of the decline of the public sphere in the middle of the nineteenth century. Kierkegaard was original, Dreyfus argues, because he believed that the very idea of the public sphere, as Habermas would

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<sup>117</sup> The life-structuring commitments Kierkegaard has in mind are commitments to the Christian faith. Dreyfus offers a secular interpretation of Kierkegaard's view.

come to express it, is deeply problematic. The detached reflection idealized by optimistic assessments of the public sphere is itself the source of “levelling” and of the passionlessness of a reflective age, according to Kierkegaard. “[He] sees the public sphere,” Dreyfus writes, “as a new and dangerous cultural phenomenon in which the nihilism produced by the press brings out something that was deeply wrong with the Enlightenment idea of detached reflection from the start.” (2001, *OTI*, 75-76) The public sphere was unsalvageable, Kierkegaard believed, according to Dreyfus, because it cannot enlist the concrete commitments to particular ways of life of social actors.<sup>118</sup> It cannot do so because it is grounded in the ideal of abstract and detached reason.

The similarities between Kierkegaard’s assessment of the public sphere and Heidegger’s arguments about “idle talk” and “curiosity” in *Being and Time* help to illustrate Dreyfus’ argument. For Heidegger, idle talk and curiosity create the possibility of “*never dwelling anywhere*” in a fundamental existential sense. (1962, 217) The way in which Dasein constantly uproots itself in curiosity is quite close to the way Kierkegaard describes the aesthetic way of life, which Dreyfus believes characterizes the public sphere and its exemplification in online networks. In all of these cases, what is forgotten is that *knowledge and information are parasitic upon deeper forms of understanding*, in the Heideggerian sense of the term. Kierkegaard’s emphasis on concrete commitments is well-understood, therefore, as a forerunner to the accounts of practical sense and intelligent coping I have discussed throughout this dissertation. Habermas’ account of the public sphere, then, represents a normative idealization of the failure to recognize the priority of practical understanding. This is, of course, a terribly quick assessment of Kierkegaard and Habermas’ positions, in particular of their conflicting accounts of the nature of the public sphere. My purpose, however, is to show how Dreyfus utilizes these points to

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<sup>118</sup> One need not necessarily turn to Habermas’ account of the public sphere to find the same lessons. Dreyfus’ arguments equally apply to claims made by media theorists like Poster, who argues that online networks happily undermine local values, beliefs and practices. “Since cultural objects circulate everywhere,” he argues, “there is no longer any *local* soil on earth.” (2006, 22) Poster’s central claim – that we must begin to think about how to build a planetary culture – will fail from the start according to Dreyfus, because any meaningful planetary culture must somehow be founded in the concrete commitments of local social actors.

condemn the value of the internet and to show how his critique bears upon Benkler's arguments. The relevant Heideggerian point Dreyfus makes is the basic claim that the internet facilitates Cartesian modes of social interaction, Cartesian in the sense that second-order, derivative and reflective thought is prioritized at the expense of embodied forms of know-how and practical sense. My contention is that this claim is structurally applicable to Benkler's focus on weak social ties, a focus which excludes the backgrounded sources of social meaning.

Driskell argues, much like Dreyfus, that online relationships cannot produce *Gemeinschaft*-like communities. They cannot do so precisely because they are based on weak social relations and weak social relations do not require social actors to make life-structuring commitments in Kierkegaard's sense. In Driskell's terms, weak social relationships have limited liability. They make no requirements on social actors to trust one another. (2002, 381-382) Both Dreyfus and Driskell cite studies by Kraut and by Norman Nie which suggested that internet use increases a sense of anonymity and isolation from other people.<sup>119</sup> These may be baleful consequences of online relationships in particular. To Dreyfus, however, they reflect an increasingly nihilistic public sphere which undermines the sources of intelligent social practice itself.

What Habermas saw as a triumph of democratization, and Kierkegaard saw as the embodiment of a reflective age, Dreyfus sees as the intrinsic nature of online networks. This is the "massive distribution of desituated information [which makes] every sort of information immediately available to anyone, thereby producing a desituated, detached spectator." (2001, 76) Dreyfus credits Edmund Burke for having shown how this aspect of the press creates a situation in which everyone has something to say about everything without ever having first-hand experience of the subject matter. Like Driskell, Dreyfus is concerned that such a situation

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<sup>119</sup> It is important to note, however, that both Kraut and Nie have updated their studies and have come to more moderate conclusions. See: Robert Kraut et al, "Internet Paradox Revisited," *Journal of Social Issues* (Vol. 58, No. 1, 2002), pgs. 49-74. For Nie's study, see the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society's "Study of the Social Consequences of the Internet," available at [http://www.stanford.edu/group/siqss/Press\\_Release/internetStudy.html](http://www.stanford.edu/group/siqss/Press_Release/internetStudy.html)

encourages people to speak without ever having to take responsibility for what they say. (2001, *OTI*, 76) As a result, Dreyfus believes that the internet creates imaginary communities which lack the essential resources to become meaningful. Rheingold's concept of the "worldwide electronic agora," which is meant to extrapolate the virtues of the Athenian agora to networked cultures, is exactly the sort of imaginary, and hence meaningless, community Dreyfus has in mind. He writes:

For Kierkegaard, a worldwide electronic agora is an oxymoron. The Athenian agora is precisely the opposite of the public sphere, where anonymous electronic kibitzers from all over the world, who risk nothing, come together to announce and defend their opinions. As an extension to the deracinated public sphere, the electronic agora is a grave danger to the real political community. Kierkegaard enables us to see that the problem is not that Rheingold's 'electronic agora' is too utopian; it is not an agora at all, but a nowhere place for anonymous nowhere people. As such, it is dangerously dystopian. (2001, *OTI*, 104)

To a significant degree, Benkler's assessment of the internet is subject to this criticism. The economic sustainability and critical capacities Benkler identifies with the online peer production of information, knowledge and culture are grounded in weak ties between social actors. The kinds of weak ties on which Benkler focuses are closely related to the interpretation of the public sphere Kierkegaard and Dreyfus criticize. This similarity becomes evident, for example, in Benkler's focus on the internet's capacity to promote the autonomy of social actors.

Autonomy, in Benkler's sense, is the capacity to author one's own life. (2006, 142) His discussion of autonomy is aimed at showing why the structure of an "information environment" is significant for the achievement of basic liberal political ends. In short, the structure of the information environment, according to Benkler, is constitutive of individuals' autonomy, and not just functionally significant to it. (2006, 146) An information environment is constitutive of autonomy in the sense that "autonomy requires the availability of options in whose adoption or rejection the individual can practice critical reflection and life choices." (2006, 151) Individual autonomy is enhanced in three ways in networked cultures, Benkler argues: networked cultures

provide an increased capacity to do things by and for oneself, an increased capacity to do things in loose commonality with others, and an increased capacity to do more in formal organizations that operate outside the market sphere.<sup>120</sup> (2006, 8)

These capacities contribute in turn to the creation of a healthy public sphere, in Benkler's estimation. His conception of the public sphere, to no surprise, is individualist in spirit. This is evident in Benkler's broader explanatory framework, which he derives from economic modes of social analysis. Even when speaking of formerly nonmarket activities such as sharing and large-scale volunteerism, Benkler characterizes social actors as consumers who enter the public sphere with pre-formed beliefs and desires. This way of understanding social action fits together with Benkler's unwavering focus on weak community ties, as well as his arguments about the positive relationship between the internet and autonomy. Tellingly, he writes, "the core role of the political public sphere is to provide a platform for converting privately developed observations, intuitions, and opinions into public opinions that can be brought to bear in the political system toward determining collective action." (2006, 185) This conception of the public sphere is quite close to the one that Kierkegaard and Dreyfus criticize. It ignores the sources of social meaning and intelligence as they see them. It also conflicts with the conclusions I've drawn about the explanation of social action in general (in Chapters Two and Three).

My argument is not against the value of autonomy as such. Nor is it against optimistic normative assessments of the internet. It is, instead, meant to suggest that a normative view like Benkler's utilizes a problematic individualistic account of social action and that, as a result, it obscures some of the most profound effects of new online practices on ordinary social actors. My extension of Dreyfus' claim about the public sphere to Benkler's focus on autonomy and its promotion by weak community ties is aimed at showing why any normative assessment of the

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<sup>120</sup> These ways in which the information environment enhance autonomy certain sound functionally significant to it rather than constitutive of it. Given my general critique that Benkler fails to understand the relationship between social practices and practical forms of understanding, it ought not to be surprising that he would gloss what it means for an environment to be constitutive of some given practice.

relationship between the internet and society must account for the intelligence of social actions and practices. This cannot be done through the exclusive lens of weak social ties.

Benkler's focus on autonomy and liberal values obscures important sources of meaning in communities. His argument about the public sphere is grounded in the claim that peer production opens new platforms for human connection, replacing common background or geographic proximity with well-defined purpose. (2006, 375) He believes that the internet allows us to "have our cake and eat it too," in the sense that online social practices facilitate the growth of weak social ties and that weak social ties are sufficient for the creation of meaningful networked social practices. (2006, 375) Benkler perhaps may even have a critique like Dreyfus' in mind when he writes:

The concern with the decline of community conceives of a scarcity of forms of stable, nurturing, embedding relations, which are mostly fixed over the life of an individual and depend on long-standing and interdependent relations in stable groups, often with hierarchical relations. What we now see emerging is a diversity of forms of attachment and an abundance of connections that enable individuals to attain discrete components of the package of desiderata that 'community' has come to stand for in sociology. As Wellman puts it: 'Communities and societies have been changing towards networked societies where boundaries are more permeable, interactions are with diverse others, linkages switch between multiple networks, and hierarchies are flatter and more recursive . . . . Their work and community networks are diffuse, sparsely knit, with vague, overlapping, social and spatial boundaries.' In this context, the range and diversity of network connections beyond the traditional family, friends, stable coworkers, or village becomes a source of dynamic stability, rather than tension and disconnect. (2006, 366)

What this argument fails to see, however, is that individuals' "well-defined purposes," as well as the "discreet components" of communities, are parasitic upon broader social fields and the practical commitments social actors make within them. Benkler's normative assessment of online networks is free to be happily optimistic because it ignores the stronger sources of social meaning embedded in the relationship between social practices and the practical understanding of ordinary social actions.

The kinds of life-structuring commitments about which Dreyfus and Kierkegaard speak are related to the analysis of generative dispositions to perceive and act in the social world in particular ways as characterized by Bourdieu. Of course, the former make a normative point; Dreyfus and Kierkegaard think that social actors *ought* to form life-structuring commitments. Bourdieu, on the other hand, argues that social action is only possible because individuals are committed anyway to homologous ways of perceiving the social world; his is an explanatory point, though one with normative implications. However, the important similarity between these ideas is the claim that most everything which goes to constitute weak social ties – common purposes, shared beliefs, etc – is parasitic upon stronger sources of social action. Without the capacity to make constitutive distinctions of value, taste, etc, in Bourdieu's terms, the sorts of weak commitments social actors make online are impossible. Failing to see this fact deeply obscures Benkler's normative assessment of online networks. About his own marquis case study – the Sinclair case – Benkler never asks, for example, why or how the committed citizens who brought down *Stolen Honor* using online activism came to have their activist commitments. This is a glaring omission.

In an analysis of the idea of online collective intelligence, Keith Hopper puts two key ideas together, the incompatibility of which clearly expresses my objection to Benkler's argument. Hopper writes:

The recent surge in Internet contribution – as witnessed by the growth of video and photo sharing and the ubiquity of blogging – has created an odd duality. On one hand, this mass participation holds great promise for building collectively intelligent environments. On the other hand, it is only through the individual motivations of the participants that contributions originate. It is solely the whim of the individual that drives the potential for collective intelligence online. (2008, 246)

The internet, I believe, does in fact have the capacity to facilitate the creation of collectively intelligent environments, to use Hopper's terms. To show this will be the goal of the concluding section of this chapter. Furthermore, Benkler is right about many of his optimistic normative



claims about the internet. He likely is right that the availability of weak ties due to online networks increases social actors' freedom to design their own communicative spaces and to utilize those communicative spaces for important social activities. Meetup.com is perhaps a good example of these capacities, as Benkler argues. (2006, 371) However, Benkler runs afoul of the important points Dreyfus makes about the strong sources of commitment in social life when, explaining the example of meetup.com, he suggests that online networks merely replace the real-world happenstance social networks that transmit information about opportunities for interest-related social relations. (2006, 368)

Benkler is wrong to think that online networks merely displace real-world weak social ties with more easily available online weak social ties. Similarly, he is wrong to think that online networks simply promote the growth of individual autonomy and a public sphere based on the weak ties between social actors. Weak social ties and online networks constitute new forms of social practice. As such, they create new kinds of social fields which affect the practical understanding of ordinary social actors. Dreyfus suggests as much by describing the status of new forms of understanding in terms of the production (or destruction) of social meaning. He would likely claim that the sort of society Benkler envisions is one that would become meaningless in the sense that distinctions constitutive of life-structuring commitments would become effaced. This argument bears resemblance to the claims I made in Chapter Four. Benkler does not recognize the difference between skillful social action guided by the practical understanding of ordinary social actors and mindful social interaction based upon articulate and communicable reasons, beliefs and purposes.

One can see Benkler's blindness to the relationship between practical understanding and meaningful social practices in his way of speaking about the nature of communication. He writes, "information and communication constitute the practices that enable a community to form a common range of understandings of what is at stake and what paths are open for the taking. They are constitutive components of both formal and informal mechanisms for deciding on

collective action.” (2006, 129-130) As with his arguments about autonomy, this claim is correct in a narrow sense. Information and communication are indeed necessary elements of the formation of a common range of understandings. But they are *not* sufficient. A “common range of understandings” arises out of a background of practical sense and out of homologous dispositions to perceive and act in the social world. This background and these dispositions are irreducible to information and communication. And as I argued in Chapter Four, these backgrounded practices are not always available to explicit linguistic articulation without distortion. Benkler is wrong then when he writes that “communication is the basic unit of social existence.” (2006, 464) Information and communication may be key factors in the creation of intelligent social practices, but intelligent social practices cannot be accounted for solely in terms of information and communication.

Gunkel puts forward a “ritual” account of communication which provides a useful foil to Benkler’s more instrumental “transmission” view of information and communication. Reading a newspaper, for example, on Gunkel’s lights, would be seen as more like attending a mass than learning new information. Gunkel writes, “whereas the transmission view is concerned with the movement of information and endeavors to measure and maximize its effectiveness, the ritual approach focuses attention on the way in which communication participates in and defines common social practices.” (2001, 79) James Carey thinks that the task of social theory in this regard is to maintain a focus on the tension between the ritual and transmission views of communication. (cited in Gunkel, 2001, 81) This is a tension, I believe, that Benkler problematically ignores.

One need not accept Dreyfus’ criticisms of the internet wholesale in order to use them to show what is wrong with Benkler’s view. Dreyfus’ critique seems vulnerable in fact on two specific points. First, as Benkler points out, it is important to compare the benefits of a networked information economy with the industrial era economy, rather than with an ideal but nonexistent public sphere. In particular, we must compare the structures of communication

internal to networked societies with the structures of mass media internal to the industrial era economy, Benkler argues. (2006, 237 and 247) Second, Dreyfus does not discuss the ways in which non-local, disembodied social relationships are critical for the integration of concrete communities into larger communities (e.g. nations). Benkler does well to elucidate this point. (2006, 349) The sort of weak ties about which Kierkegaard and Dreyfus are worried seem ineliminable for this purpose.

I will have more to say about broader problems in Dreyfus' pessimistic assessment of the internet shortly. The point here, though, which Dreyfus does well to articulate, is that social theorists must study the "strong" sources of social meaning in order to give a full normative assessment of online social practices. The study of these sources of social meaning is impossible if one fails to recognize the central role played by embodied forms of practical sense in ordinary social life. This means that social theorists must study the forms of practical understanding created by new forms of social practice in order to understand and evaluate the effects of increased weak social ties – which are prominent in online social practices – on modern societies. What normative accounts of the internet ought to study are the ways in which online networks are integrated into as well as profoundly change existing communities. We must do this in such a way as to allow our higher-order evaluative and explanatory concepts to be challenged by these new forms of practice and also perhaps reinforced by them (in the way that I discussed in the previous chapter). Only then can we ask, as Benkler does, where and when the sort of weak ties facilitated by the internet are beneficial and where and when they are not. Doing so requires us to ask how those weak social ties and the new forms of social practice they facilitate structure our very ways of understanding them.

*Information Retrieval and Intelligent Practices*

My goal is to ask how the internet can be studied as a facilitator of intelligent social practices. This is to say that the actions and interactions of internet users create coherent and meaningful social practices autochthonously, that is, with or without higher-order propositional articulation. Implicitly, this constitutes an argument against an instrumental conception of the internet and against instrumental views of communications technologies generally. Online networks do not merely help or hinder social actors to act on their beliefs and desires. Rather, online networks alter the landscape of social conditions within which social actors' practical understanding is created. They do so, I will argue, by creating new forms of intelligent and meaningful social practices.

Dreyfus' critique shows how online social practices might affect the practical understanding of social actors, but it does so with excessive focus on the negative effects of this relationship. Dreyfus fails to see that the internet has the capacity to create intelligent social practices which can in turn facilitate the growth of new forms of social meaning. In this section, I will describe Dreyfus' argument against the value of systems of online information retrieval, an argument which is related to what has become known as the "Babel Problem." In short, Dreyfus applies his fears about nihilism to the systems which organize knowledge and information online. What he fails to see, however, is that these systems – like Google, Wikipedia and Amazon – do not annihilate the coherence and organization of knowledge and information. Rather, they create innovative and meaningful new practices surrounding these vital cultural currencies. These new practices of knowledge and information in turn affect the very questions social theorists ought to ask about the internet. It is by studying the structure of these new social fields that the questions asked and concepts used by social theorists will change for the better.

If correct, my argument about intelligent online practices helps to solve one of the most visible and damning critiques of the internet, which has come to be known as the "Babel

Problem.” Crudely, the Babel Problem names the fear that when everyone speaks, no one listens. It is characterized by the idea of information overload. As such, it is closely related to Kierkegaard’s critique of the public sphere. The question posed by the Babel Problem is whether the internet intrinsically threatens the sources of meaning and coherence in social life. Benkler describes two concerns associated with the idea of a Babel Problem: first, Eli Noam’s fear that monied interests will emerge as the only social force capable of organizing the vast amounts of information and content online and will come to dominate the internet as a result; second, Cass Sunstein’s fear that public discourse and attention will fragment as a result of the ease with which the internet becomes personalized. (2006, 233-245) Sunstein’s fear is related to Nicholas Negroponte’s prediction that people will soon be reading “The Daily Me,” that is, that online networks will allow individuals to tailor-make their information environment to suit their own narrow, and increasingly fragmented, preferences. (Benkler, 2006, 238)

Andrew Keen’s critique of what he calls the “cult of the amateur” is the most prominent argument in the popular press against the idea that online social practices can create meaning and intelligence. Keen’s concern about information overload, particularly on “user-generated” websites such as Wikipedia, leads him to suggest that the internet (as it stands today) represents a “chaotic media without the essential epistemological anchor of truth,” an anchor which he believes characterized older methods of organizing the media. (2007) “Digital narcissism,” according to Keen, is the radical democratization of the production of knowledge, information and culture which the internet makes possible. His critique is staked on the claim that this radical democratization creates a dumbed-down generation of media illiterates. (2006) Keen is nostalgic for news anchors, compared with the open platform of news websites like digg.com, which essentially allow users to determine by voting which stories become headlines. He is similarly nostalgic for editorial boards, compared with the radically inclusive nature of Wikipedia. Keen’s argument is essentially that the web, like all aspects of culture, needs leaders and experts. Fears of a chaotic phenomenon spiraling out of control lead Keen and others to call for leaders whose

legitimacy is generally recognized to help secure the health of social life as new practices emerge in conjunction with new technologies.

It is worth noting that Keen's critique of the internet on the basis of the Babel Problem is not particularly new. It fits into two notable traditions: first, of those prognosticators of societies' impending doom due to some pervasive new technology; second, of those intellectuals, perhaps like Alan Bloom, who believe that democracy requires hierarchical and perhaps undemocratic practices and institutions. Keen's critique is also reminiscent of fears surrounding the advent of the telegraph, radio, telephone, television and movie technologies. Anxieties surrounding the proliferation of motion pictures in the 1890s and after 1900, for example, according to Starr, focused on the destabilization of traditional practices in the face of an increasingly diverse and urban population. These anxieties, Starr argues, replicated the same dynamic tensions surrounding the advent of virtually every new communications media: moral subversion, cultural decline and the undoing of social bonds. (2004, 295) The historical familiarity of the Babel Problem in the face of these recurrent critiques perhaps helps to take some wind out of its critical sails, for it suggests that the internet embodies an ongoing cultural evolutionary process rather than the death knell of culture itself.

Dreyfus puts forward an argument about the internet's capacity to organize information which is closely related to both the Babel Problem and to his own Kierkegaardian assessment of the online public sphere. Dreyfus contributes to the sense that the consequence of online activity is largely the chaos of Babel. This argument is wrong about the nature of online information retrieval, but the way in which it is wrong helps to show what I mean by intelligence in online networks.

Dreyfus argues that hyperlinks – which are perhaps the central organizing tool of the internet's architecture – were not created because they represented better ways to organize information. They are, instead, a natural way to utilize the speed and processing power of computers, which can store vast amounts of information but cannot distinguish the meaning or

purpose of one byte from another. (2001, *OTI*, 9) This last point is derived from Dreyfus' seminal critique of the idea of artificial intelligence. Thirty years ago he predicted, correctly, that artificial intelligence programs would fail principally because they lack the critical embodied skills of practical understanding which I have described throughout this dissertation (often using Dreyfus' own arguments). Put simply, because computers can only recognize rules and propositions, one cannot endow them with a background of non-propositional understanding. One cannot teach a computer the vast set of backgrounded assumptions like, for example, that if George Washington was in the Capitol building, so was his left foot, or that when he died, he stayed dead. (2001, *OTI*, 16) That sort of understanding only exists in the background of embodied practical sense which I described in Chapter Three.

Dreyfus applies this same intuition to online information retrieval systems. Though he does not say so explicitly, his critique is aimed directly at the possible success of a "semantic web," that is, an online network comprised of machine-readable cues which would enable computers to understand and communicate the requests made by human beings. The idea of a semantic web necessarily fails, Dreyfus believes, because computers, which merely collect disembodied data, lack a background of practical understanding. As a result, "online search techniques," Dreyfus writes, "are crippled in advance by having to approximate a human sense of meaning and relevance grounded in the body, without a body and therefore without commonsense." (2001, *OTI*, 25-6) Much to the same point, Don Swanson writes, "machines cannot recognize meaning and so cannot duplicate what human judgment in principle can bring to the process of indexing and classifying documents." (quoted in Dreyfus, 2001, *OTI*, 21)

Dreyfus is deeply pessimistic about online practices of information retrieval. They displace our traditional interest in finding the "right" piece of information, he believes, with whatever most suits our fancy. Dreyfus pessimistically assesses the usefulness of search engines because they, like the internet in general, appeal to people who like the idea of rejecting authority and hierarchy and "who don't worry about the practical problem of finding relevant

information.”<sup>121</sup> (2001, *OTI*, 12) The characteristic (or caricatured?) subject who uses hyperlinks, Dreyfus argues, is not the modern subject with a fixed identity who desires a more complete and reliable picture of the world, but rather a “postmodern, protean being” always open to new horizons, a being who is not interested in connecting to what is significant, but to as wide a web of information as possible. (2001, *OTI*, 11)

At the center of Dreyfus’ description of online information retrieval – which he calls a “horrendous problem.” (15, *OTI*, 2001) – is a claim about the traditional relationship between the natural “joints” of the world and human taxonomies of knowledge. Put simply, Dreyfus believes that practices of online information retrieval represent a significant departure from older forms of information taxonomy, such as the Dewey decimal system. The goal of a system like Dewey was to come as close as possible to mirroring the way the world really is. The internet abandons this project, Dreyfus claims, catering instead to the “protean” desires and ephemeral interests of online dilettantes. On Dreyfus’ lights, this fact is intrinsic to the nature of online networks because they are run by computers and computers cannot understand meaning or relevance. “Indeed,” Dreyfus writes, “faith in incremental progress towards being able to retrieve just those and only those documents one needs only makes sense if there is one taxonomy, like that of Aristotle or the Dewey decimal system, that captures the way the world is divided up. But in a world of hyperlinks, there can be no saving metaphysical solution.” (2001, *OTI*, 23)

There is no doubt that systems of online information retrieval portend anti-authoritarian, anti-metaphysical attitudes in modern societies. As the title of Weinberger’s book suggests, on the web, everything is miscellaneous. But in *Everything is Miscellaneous*, Weinberger does not conclude that miscellany produces chaos. To the contrary, Weinberger argues that the chaotic

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<sup>121</sup> *On the Internet* was originally published in 2001. One might wonder whether Dreyfus would have a less pessimistic assessment of a search engine like Google today. The second edition of *On the Internet* is due to be published in early 2009 (too late for inclusion in this dissertation), however in personal communication, Dreyfus has told me that he plans to change very little of his arguments.



character of the internet is the source of its unique potential to create new forms of coherent social practice and new forms of sense and understanding in turn.

Weinberger, like Dreyfus, discusses the traditional practices of libraries and encyclopedias for organizing knowledge and information. But he does so because the practices employed by libraries and encyclopedias *were* quintessential tools for organizing information, but no longer are. Libraries and encyclopedias function by distinguishing data from metadata, as Weinberger puts it. What fits on a library card in a card catalogue is metadata, while that to which the card refers is data. Weinberger credits Aristotle for understanding the difference between data and metadata in a way that Plato did not. His point in making this comparison is to suggest that the capacity to organize information by distinguishing data from metadata marked an epochal leap forward in human history. (2007, 69) Furthermore, these techniques for organizing information – which are in some sense the ones Dreyfus believes the protean characteristics of the internet undermines – are related to four closely related characteristics of knowledge as traditionally understood, Weinberger argues. First, the idea that metadata corresponds directly to facts about the world points to the essentialist tradition in western civilizations. Second, to similar effect, Weinberger suggests that the architecture of our systems for organizing knowledge have assumed that ambiguity is in the construction of metadata, and not in the things themselves. As such, we have assumed that filters are required to organize information, usually in the form of experts whose assessments of what ought to be included in an encyclopedia, for example, are recognized as legitimate. Finally, we have tended to believe that those experts achieve their status meritocratically, at least in an ideal world. (2007, 100-101)

Weinberger proposes a number of ways in which online information retrieval changes these characteristics of knowledge and information. I will consider three central claims that he makes and then will go on to briefly consider his most radical conclusion. Each of Weinberger's claims is meant to suggest how systems of online information retrieval are recreating social practices having to do with the creation and communication of information, knowledge and

culture. This is to suggest, in turn, contra Dreyfus, Keen, et al that the order which emerges online helps to create new forms of intelligent and meaningful social practices. The three characteristics of online information retrieval systems Weinberger discusses are the importance of tagging, the challenge to essentialism, and the limited value of experts on user-generated media, such as Wikipedia. The combination of these points leads to Weinberger's most significant claim, which is that the internet creates and sustains social meaning itself. It does so, he argues, by building the background of understanding so well described by Dreyfus into an operative social tool.

Tags are thematic hyperlinks. They allow a user of online resources – photos, web pages, etc – to add a word or two (or more) to a hyperlink so that she (and others) can easily find that webpage later. Websites like del.icio.us are essentially bookmarking clearinghouses for web users to tag online content. The aim of tagging is also to make documents easy to find; more broadly, the ubiquity of the practice helps to reorganize the relationship between data and metadata. A library card is, in some sense, a tag. It picks out what the librarian deems to be the essential characteristics of a book in order to make that book easy to find. The difference between tagging and traditional forms of thematically summarizing a document or a book, however, is that the latter has physical limitations. One can only fit so much information on an entry in a library card catalogue, or in an encyclopedia article, before one problematically blurs the distinction between data and metadata. One undermines the usefulness of a card catalogue if one simply uses bigger and bigger cards; at some point, the distinction between data and metadata becomes ineffectual. Tagging circumvents this limitation.

Flickr, a website for organizing photos, allows users to apply an indefinite number of tags to a photo. A photo uploaded to Flickr can be tagged in as many ways as one can think: “Aunt Sally, Mexico, 2005, beach, birthday, twins, badminton, sunset, trips, foreign countries, fun times, relatives, places we want to go back to, days we got sunburned,” Weinberger writes, concluding, “the digital world thereby allows us to transcend the most fundamental rule of

ordering the real world: Instead of everything having its place, it's better if things can get assigned to multiple places simultaneously." (2007, 14)

Weinberger's central point is that the internet's architecture eliminates the physical limitations of space which defined our previous ways of ordering the world. Online, one creates order by adding, rather than subtracting, metadata. "*The solution to the overabundance of information,*" Weinberger writes, "*is more information.*" (2007, 13) The reason for this is because order, connections and shared themes emerge as users add more and more tags. This intuition explains the subtitle of Weinberger's book: "The Power of the New Digital Disorder." Rather than find ways to impose order on the internet, Weinberger claims that practices like tagging enable order to emerge autochthonously from the Babel-like character of online networks. Disassembled, the bookmarks and tags on del.icio.us or Flickr would be utterly chaotic. Because of the architecture of online information retrieval systems, however, their miscellany doesn't reduce their utility. (2007, 94) To the contrary, it increases their utility.

Google's "PageRank" system works by utilizing the ordering capacity of tags. Generally credited to be the reason that Google has become today's dominant search engine, the PageRank systems works on the assumption that the best way to prioritize search results is not by the characteristics of a document, but by the number of sites that link to it. (Tapscott and Williams, 2006, 41) It treats links from other websites pointing to a given website like a vote of confidence, effectively harnessing individual actions to create a database of collective preferences, as Benkler points out. (2006, 76) Google's assumption is that what individuals want to find is a reflection of what others think is worthwhile. (Benkler, 2006, 291) Amazon's search engines, as well as its systems for making recommendations to its customers, works similarly. Amazon utilizes what Weinberger calls "planned serendipity:" instead of relying upon a user's knowledge of book publishers' classifications systems, Amazon users collaborative filters to make recommendations to returning customers. (2007, 59) Weinberger gives an example (2007, 58): suppose one wants to find a copy of *The Little House Cookbook: Frontier Foods from Laura Ingalls Wilder's*

*Classic Stories*. This book is found in the New York Public Library system under the call number 641.59 W, which translates to: Technology and Applied Sciences > Home economics and family living > Food and drink. In any given branch of the library system, it is found in a single room.

On Amazon, the book is listed under three categories:

Children's Books > Authors & Illustrators, A-Z > (W) > Williams, Garth

Children's Books > History & Historical Fiction > United States > 1800s

Children's Books > Sports & Activities > Cooking

Beneath the listing of children's book categories, Amazon lets you check eight or nine related categories to see what books might be similar to the *Little House Cookbook*. "It's like having a Dewey decimal classification system written to order," Weinberger writes. (2007, 59) His central claim is that the nature of online information retrieval systems allows this "write to order" culture to be orderly, useful and intelligent. It creates a new kind of order in our informational practices. More specifically, it creates an anti-essentialist order, one which prioritizes the common understandings of ordinary social actors.

Dreyfus' argument against systems of online information retrieval was that they abandon the attempt to incrementally increase the degree to which our systems for organizing information mirror the way the world really is. He cited Aristotle's metaphysics and the Dewey decimal system as examples (in that order, presumably, to mark our progress). A serious problem with these schemata, however, as Weinberger points out, is that they are fixed to bygone conceptions of the world. Their architecture for organizing metadata cannot evolve, in other words, as knowledge itself evolves. This is a problem the degree to which at least certain aspects of the information we seek to organize is itself always changing.

For example, Weinberger discusses the classification of religions in the Dewey decimal system. Eight of the nine major divisions under the religion classification in that system are

dedicated explicitly for Christian books. While Judaism occupies its own whole number (#296), Islam shares its number with Babism and Baha'i (#297). Buddhism is a subcategory of "Religions of the Indic Origin" (#294). The same problem plagues Dewey's classification of philosophy, which exemplifies archaic disciplinary boundaries by giving the 100s to "philosophy and psychology." It gives the entire 130s to "Paranormal phenomena," with subtopics such as "Occult methods for achieving well-being" (#131), "Divinatory graphology" (predicting the future by analyzing handwriting – #137), and "phrenology" (#139). This is to say that phrenology is put on par in the Dewey system with Aristotle (#185) and the whole of "Oriental" philosophy (#181)! (2007, 47-48)

Weinberger is an anti-essentialist. He writes, "the Dewey Decimal Classification system can't be fixed because knowledge itself is unfixed. Knowledge is diverse, changing, imbued with the cultural values of the moment." (2007, 56) This is a bold anti-essentialist claim. Weinberger does not so much argue for the social construction of knowledge as he does assume that postmodern philosophical accounts of epistemology have proven it so.<sup>122</sup> That said, he is quite right that systems of online information classification are far more flexible than their forerunners and that this flexibility is attractive in a number of ways. Put simply, everything becomes potential metadata online. Think, for example, Weinberger suggests, of all the ways one can search the contents of a book online. (2007, 104) As the example about Dewey's classification of religions suggests, there are important benefits to this flexibility. One of them is the capacity to challenge our assumptions about natural kinds. Weinberger offers two more elucidating examples to make this point. Until the advent of itunes, we have tended to assume that the album is a natural kind for organizing music. The searchability of itunes shows, however, that, *at this*

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<sup>122</sup> To be charitable, I should note that Weinberger – a former professor of philosophy – is quite likely very capable of arguing for his anti-essentialist views. *Everything is Miscellaneous*, however, is not a book of philosophy. To be sure, this is no defense of Weinberger's position, but perhaps it ought to deflect some reasonable hand-wringing.

*time*, the single musical track is a more basic unit. (2007, 9) Weinberger's second example discusses biological taxonomy.

The classification of the species of plants and animals on the planet challenges essentialist assumptions in analogous ways to what Amazon does for product recall. Scientific taxonomies are by no means uniform and universally accepted. This is not because scientists have failed to overcome differences in language or taxonomic preference. It is because even the classification of natural species raises perhaps insoluble interpretive controversies about natural kinds. How one classifies a particular bird, for example, Weinberger believes, depends on which characteristics one takes to be essential: the color of the plumage, the shape of the bill, DNA, skeletal structure, geographic location, with what other birds they breed, etc. (2007, 116) Weinberger's argument here, of course, is quite controversial, for it may be that biologists have simply not yet discovered which characteristics of birds are the truly essential ones for classifying them. However, the internet may help biologists to solve classification problems no matter whether the essentialists or anti-essentialists turn out to be right.

Weinberger cites David Rensen's "uBio" project, or "Universal Biological Indexer and Organizer," as an example. Put simply, rather than pare down the number of names an organism has to the most essential ones, the uBio project invites any and all possibilities, no matter how regional or non-scientific. The database then allows users to tag reasonably accepted scientific taxonomies with references to a number of common names and characteristics. The point, Weinberger argues, is that uBio accommodates the diverse opinions of many scientists, collects them into a coherent whole, and makes them available for inspection in new ways. Rather than demonstrate Rensen's idea about the right way to classify species, it delivers the maximum potential knowledge *of* all of the involved participants *to* all of the involved participants. (2007, 114)

Weinberger's argument against essentialism is perhaps less useful as a formal philosophical theory than it is as a characterization of the emerging intelligence of online

networks. The examples I have discussed thus far suggest that systems of online information retrieval create order in new ways which are more flexible than older classification systems. This is not a normative point so much as a claim about the orderliness of seemingly chaotic classificatory systems. A critic like Dreyfus would likely worry that this system of organizing information amounts to no system at all; that it is simply protean postmodern subjectivism in disguise. But it is not. Briefly, in conclusion, I would like to put forward Wikipedia as an exemplar. I will use this example to illustrate Weinberger's most overarching point, which is that the internet is a tool for building social meaning.

Weinberger discusses Wikipedia in order to show how experts and gatekeepers are helpful but of limited value in online informational practices. Wikipedia is structured on an "open platform" at both "ends." That is, there are virtually no requirements for what may become an entry on the online encyclopedia and there are no settled objectives toward which entries ought to be aimed. Regardless of qualification, anyone can make an entry on Wikipedia and anyone can edit another's entry.<sup>123</sup> Linked to every entry is a "History" page containing all past edits, as well as a "Discussion" page which enables multiple editors to coordinate their work. Wikipedia's veracity has been challenged by endless critics, although studies have generally shown it to be roughly as accurate as the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.<sup>124</sup> On the use-end, Wikipedia has become a news source,<sup>125</sup> for example, and has lent itself to novel defense tactics in court cases,<sup>126</sup> not to

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<sup>123</sup> Wikipedia does grant trusted members with the power to patrol for spammers, jokers and ideologues. Its system for awarding these editorial functions to certain members is, however, in some sense, self-generating. Members in good standing can be elected to various levels of volunteer stewardship, ascending in degree of privilege. They generally patrol for "neutral point of view" infractions and flag articles with insufficient or improper citations.

<sup>124</sup> See, for example: Jim Giles, "Internet Encyclopedias Go Head to Head," in *Nature*, #438, 15 December 2005. Pgs. 900-901.

<sup>125</sup> Following the massacre at Virginia Tech, for example, newspapers were apparently checking their information against Wikipedia, which had become a clearinghouse of sorts for breaking news. See: Jonathan Dee, "All the News That's Fit to Print Out," *New York Times*, 1 July 2007.

<sup>126</sup> Floyd Landis, the disgraced cycling champion of the Tour de France, posted 370 pages of his testosterone tests online, asking if anyone could help explain his apparently contradictory results. See: Jennifer Hughes, "The Wiki Defense," *Columbia Journalism Review* (May/June 2007), pg. 20.

mention its pedagogical uses in classrooms. These innovative and unpredictable ends are intrinsic to the Wiki platform itself.

Wikipedia may offer many instrumental benefits to its users. As Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia's founder, puts it, perhaps a bit ostentatiously: "imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we're doing." (Slashdot.com interview, 28 July 2004) Beyond these instrumental uses, however, Wikipedia's most central innovation may be its capacity to reflect the ongoing evolution of collective understanding and knowledge. Wikipedia constantly updates itself in ways that libraries and encyclopedias cannot. A typical example was the "Seigenthaler Incident" in 2005. A false biography was posted on John Seigenthaler Sr., a well-known writer and journalist. When the hoax was discovered, Seigenthaler wrote an op-ed in *USA Today* condemning Wikipedia and lobbied Congress for greater regulation of websites. The key point to note, however, was that immediately upon discovery of the error, Wikipedia's entry on Seigenthaler was corrected. The incident, which is frequently used to criticize Wikipedia's accuracy and general social value, demonstrates quite the opposite. It shows that one of the central strengths of Wikipedia is its flexibility. The same can be said about Wikipedia's errors in various entries on natural science. While the study in the journal *Nature* found Wikipedia and *Britannica* to have roughly the same number of serious errors, only on Wikipedia were those errors immediately corrected following the article's publication.

Wikipedia is an example of what Benkler calls "social software," that is, software which is capable of evolving along with social norms and their changes. (2006, 374) Google is another example of social software. Weinberger uses these examples to make his most far-reaching suggestion. Websites like these, he argues, have the potential to make a community's understanding explicit in ways that were impossible before.

A powerful example of what Weinberger means is represented in an obscenity case soon to be heard in Florida. In that case, the defense attorney plans to make a novel argument about



community life using “Google Trends,” a tool which enables users to track the frequency of terms searched on the popular website. The attorney’s claim is that pornographic images found on the defendant’s website do not violate “contemporary community standards,” which are the legal measure of obscenity. According to the *New York Times*, the attorney “plans to show that residents of Pensacola are more likely to use Google to search for terms like ‘orgy’ than for ‘apple pie’ or ‘watermelon.’” (24 June, 2008) Despite what citizens might say in public, in other words, Google reveals our real standards. This strategy raises interesting questions about the nature of community standards and whether they are measured by the public face of morality or by what people actually do.<sup>127</sup> More to my point, it suggests that the internet may be capable of giving order to ordinarily implicit understandings in new ways.

With explicit references to Heideggerian arguments about the background of practical understanding, Weinberger argues that the internet externalizes social meanings. By utilizing the miscellaneous nature of information, through tagging, for example, he argues that we are in effect making what is implicit about our practices of knowledge and information – that is, what Dreyfus calls the background of understanding – explicit. (2007, 165) The internet externalizes meaning in Heidegger’s sense of the term, in other words. (2007, 171) The value of the internet, Weinberger writes, “is in the implicit relationships that turn it into an *infrastructure of meaning*.” (2007, 171)

Weinberger gives three reasons why he believes that networked computers can make the implicit background of practical understanding explicit. With enough people tagging, he argues, computers don’t have to rely on the explicit knowledge of any one person in the way, for example, that an artificial intelligence programmer would be at a loss to articulate all the commonsense values operating in the background of an ordinary agent’s know-how. Second, Weinberger argues that computers can surmise probabilistic links between tags. In making this

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<sup>127</sup> See, for example: William Saletan, “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Orgy: Sexual Hypocrisy and the Internet,” *Slate*, 27 June, 2008. <http://www.slate.com/id/2194336/>

point, he refers back to an example about pictures of the Golden Gate Bridge, showing how Flickr's program can recognize the fact that many people tag the same photo with the terms "San Francisco" and "Golden Gate." Third, computers can integrate tagging with information about our social networks. For example, Amazon integrates its history of past purchases with data about who one knows, where one lives, etc. (2007, 166-7) Although this last point may raise concerns about privacy, it also suggests that the networks online computer users create may elucidate the collective understanding of social actors.

Weinberger believes that the internet may help modern Western societies to move past the cultural goals of the Enlightenment. The task of those 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals, he believes, was to build knowledge. Ours, by contrast, is to build meaning. "The public construction of meaning," Weinberger writes, in sum, "is the most important project of the next hundred years." (2007, 222) Though this may be a dubious schematization of the core claims of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment cultural ideals, it gives needed attention to the deep changes our higher-order ideals undergo in light of new forms of social practice. Furthermore, it makes plain, as I have been attempting to show in this section, that online practices do not necessarily undermine meaning in social life.

There are other reasons too to be concerned about Weinberger's boldest claim. Dreyfus would surely doubt the capacity of networked computers to build an infrastructure of social meaning which represents the background of practical understanding. Even if this is possible, apropos of my arguments in Chapter Four, one might worry about the distortive effects on everyday practice of the explicit articulation of social meaning. That said, considering what these effects may be is exactly the project I endorse. The internet grants social theorists a unique opportunity to study the transformation of ordinary practical understanding into explicit bodies of knowledge and information. One possible way this transformation is occurring is through the infrastructure of social meaning Weinberger describes. Whether or not he is correct in his assessment of this particular possibility, the broader point is that online practices are in the

process of creating new social fields through which ordinary social actors are learning to navigate intelligently. The practical understanding they (and we) use in doing so will help social theorists to assess what the internet means for modern societies from both explanatory and normative points of view.

## Conclusion

My goal has been to show why accounts of social action are improved if they study the practical understanding social actors utilize in their day to day activities as compared to the beliefs, desires or reasons they often point to upon reflection as causes of action. I have tried to provide an alternative, in other words, to the dominant orientation of contemporary theoretical accounts of social action which are founded on the study of the psychology of individual intentional actors. My central claim has been that the study of social action must distinguish *intelligent action* from *intentional action*. This broad claim has led to three specific tasks: first, to show that the “know-how,” “practical sense,” or “embodied practical understanding” of ordinary social actors helps to explain their actions; second, to consider the ramifications for normative social theories of the study of these practical and “sub-intentional” sources of action; and third, to apply my claims about intelligent social action to the study of a contemporary area of social practice.

In this conclusion, I will briefly identify what I take to be the central challenge for ongoing research in each of the main sections of the dissertation, given the arguments I have made and the conclusions that I have reached. Rather than restate the key claims of each chapter, I will attempt to connect the central inflection points of this dissertation to difficult theoretical questions that must be asked in the near future. I do so in order to shape the outline of a research program aimed at rethinking social theory by moving away from what Dreyfus has called “the myth of the mental” and towards the careful study of ordinary, intelligent and practical action. Mindlessness and mindless action have usually been understood as intrusions upon or interruptions into the normal higher-order reflective experiences of otherwise rationally-minded

social actors. One way to characterize my approach to social theory is as just the opposite of this orientation, namely, that higher-order faculties like rationality, judgment, interpretation and reflection are intrusions upon or interruptions into the experiences of otherwise mindless, but intelligent, social actors.

### *Explanations of Social Action*

Three areas of inquiry stand out as a result of my claim in Chapters Two and Three that theories of practical sense help to explain social action.

First, explaining social action is deeply important. It is nearly impossible to solve a problem without knowing the cause of that problem. Philosophers of social science are rightly concerned with distinguishing genuine explanations of social action from spurious explanations. In Chapter Two, I discussed Cohen's claims against Elster that "functional elaborations" of social action can count as genuine explanations. I argued against broad claims for the value of functionalism in social theory, but I suggested that Cohen's sense of explanatory elaborations can be used to broaden our theoretical understanding of what counts as a cause for action. (Cohen himself believes that functional explanations are kinds of causal explanations, but I will leave that claim aside for now.) How far can Cohen's concept of explanatory elaborations take us? What kinds of elaborations of social action can count as causal explanations? In particular, which aspects of ordinary social skill can lend themselves to causal elaborations of action? I argued in Chapter Three that Bourdieu's model of *habitus* provides genuine explanations of social action and social practices. More research must be done examining which specific aspects of *habitus* yield fine-grained explanations of which specific social phenomena. Of which particular practices, for example, is taste – in Bourdieu's sense – an explanatory elaboration?

Second, my critique of emergentism in Chapter Two is meant to show why metaphysically dualist forms of “strong sociological” explanation fail. This critique focused on the British Emergentists of the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Emergentism has resurfaced today across a wide swath of scholarly pursuits. Interdisciplinary studies of the ways that complex systems and patterns issue from a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions in natural, artificial and social systems are on the rise. In particular, the field of “social emergence” is promising. We must consider whether or not this field has moved beyond the foundational metaphysical problems of the earlier British Emergentist movement. If so, are there theoretical problems facing studies of social emergentism which can benefit from the study of the relationship of embodied practical sense and social fields? In what ways can the empirical and mathematical studies of emergent properties incorporate theoretical accounts of social skill and embodied understanding?

Finally, as I discussed in Chapter Three, Bourdieu argues that particular forms of *habitus* – generated in response to particular social fields – are presupposed by the capacity and inclination of some social actors to participate in rational deliberation. Rationality, in other words, is a strategy, on Bourdieu’s lights, one which is practiced by those who participate in social fields which valorize rationality. In this dissertation, I have not discussed what forms of *habitus* are presupposed by other valuable social phenomena, in particular, other social skills which may be normatively attractive but are often overshadowed by scholarly interest in rationality. What forms of *habitus* are presupposed by the tendency to have social hope, for example? Contrariwise, what forms of *habitus* are presupposed by social fear?

*Positive Indeterminacy*

In the body of the dissertation, an investigation into the nature of normative social theories follows my discussion of explanatory accounts of social action. Here, I will discuss key challenges facing my arguments in Chapter Four. In the next section of this conclusion, I will identify key challenges facing my arguments in Chapter Five.

My claim about positively indeterminate social phenomena represents my most far-reaching and most radical conclusion with regard to social theory in general. My view is that the taking of a higher-order reflective stance on areas of practice has the potential to disable one's ability to act in that field of practice. This view, if correct, raises two difficult questions in particular for normative social theorizing.

First, what is the relationship of practical reasoning to positively indeterminate social skills? I have argued, most basically, that social actors often cannot act skillfully and reflect on their action simultaneously. What resources, then, might social theorists develop to displace or supplement the assumption that practical reason is a form of deliberation? Csikszentmihalyi's view of "optimal experience" in his book *Flow* represents a view of agential action which ought to be considered a form of practical reason without deliberation. Francisco Varela and David Velleman have investigated related forms of "ethical know-how" and "higher wantonness," respectively. New fields of therapy – such as interpersonal psychoanalysis – focus on the processes of selective *inattention* which make many of our social relationships possible. All of these views demand careful consideration given my conclusions in Chapter Four.

Second, regarding social practices, we must ask if forms of collective action exist which are intelligent and deliberate but are not necessarily deliberative. What forms of collective action might utilize positively indeterminate social practices? By far the most difficult question facing any talk of mindless intelligent action on a macro-social scale focuses on processes of legitimation. Can social practices be legitimized without undermining their "flow" by the

exchange of reasons? Some might suggest that legitimation is itself suspect when depicted as the “bottom line” with respect to forms of practice. I think this suspicion is correct if processes of legitimation distort and thereby disable the success of ordinary social practices, in the ways that I have argued that forms of higher-order reflection are capable of doing. I do not see this as a reason to reject the importance of legitimation as a social and theoretical project. Far from it. Rather, I see it as an invitation to investigate new modalities of collective action and new conceptions of the purpose of normative theoretical discourse.

### *Effective Normative Theories*

My arguments about normative legal theories suggest that social theorists do not have the strong conceptual grasp of the practices at hand that they seem to have. This argument is at the bottom of my interpretation of Dewey’s view of “romantic individualism.” It issues in conclusions about the importance of concept reformulation in social theory. I then go on to argue that concept reformulation must be supplemented by something like what Bourdieu calls self-reflexivity. The purpose of these arguments is to suggest how normative theories might more successfully effectuate their goals and prescriptions.

What other areas of contemporary social practice – analogous to legal theory – suggest that we do not have the conceptual grasp of the practices that we think we have? Online practices are not a good example of this particular phenomenon because it is plainly obvious that nobody has a clear conceptual grip on the internet yet. More germane are phenomena like stock markets, which seem to be theoretically transparent from afar but continually obscure even the best theories in practice. Apropos of my arguments in Chapter Five, however, my point is not simply to suggest that we need better concepts in order to understand stock markets. From a normative perspective, we must inquire about the very relationship between conceptualization and practice



and do so with assiduous attention to the relationship between forms of conceptualization and their actual effects on practice. When investigating areas of social practice that continually seem to defy higher-order accounts of them, such as stock markets, social theorists must not only strive for better views of practice but must strive to consider the meaning and fallout of *taking a view* on practice in the first place.

Doing so is at the core of Bourdieu's arguments for self-reflexivity in social science, as I have argued in Chapter Five. The usefulness of self-reflexivity, according to Bourdieu, is that it throws the backgrounded values social theorists bring to their work into relief. He argues that the operative values which structure the fields of academic inquiry are universality, rationality and the pursuit of the common good. By self-reflexively challenging the universality of these values, Bourdieu believes that we can reinforce their status and their effectiveness in practice. Self-reflexivity is therefore admittedly somewhat paradoxical. If it is coherent and useful nonetheless – which I believe it is – then it is incumbent upon social theorists to consider other constitutive values inherent to social theory which ought to be self-reflexively challenged and thereby reinforced. What values other than those which emphasize universality, rationality and the common good might benefit from self-reflexive inquiry, in Bourdieu's sense?

### *The Internet*

The overarching challenge facing my discussion in Chapter Six is determining how to strengthen the inferential links between my theoretical account of practical sense and the application of those arguments to specific questions about the internet. I have shown why a whole host of issues related to the study of online social practices orbit around accounts of the practical sense of ordinary social actors. I have also shown how normative assessments of the internet's social and ethical implications – on community life, for example – can be improved if

their scope is broadened from a narrow focus on weak social ties to a broader focus on the stronger sources of social skill and intelligence. More specific questions about these claims need to be asked.

First, does practical understanding develop in the disembodied relations of cyberspace, and if so, how? Does an analysis of the embodied social structures of judgment, like that found in Bourdieu's *Distinction*, apply to online social relationships? These questions can be answered by interpreting new research in perception and cognitive development in computer-mediated communication and by applying phenomenological descriptions of everyday intelligent coping to the study of online interactions.

Second, in light of Weinberger's argument that the internet is capable of making formerly opaque sources of social meaning explicit, to what degree can the internet be represented as a tool for the creation of collective intelligence? Can the study of the internet as a social practice help to create a better definition of the very idea of collective intelligence? Online networks are being heralded today because they purportedly materialize something no less historically ephemeral and normatively attractive (to some) than Rousseau's "general will." Versions of this attitude are found in particular in the literature addressing user-generated (or "peer produced") communities such as Wikipedia and Second Life. This literature is diverse, disparate and untutored with respect to theories of practical sense and social action.

Finally, how might scholars utilize the study of online networks to help define and effectuate new pathways for the pursuit of social change? What forms of collective intelligence can scholars themselves create and utilize? Theoretical study of the practical understanding of internet users in this sense may help to bridge the divide between theory and practice. Doing so would be an accomplishment that I would take to be a sign of success for social theories in general. Although not the principle aim of each section of this dissertation, it is an accomplishment to which I hope to have contributed nonetheless.

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## *Vita for Michael Brownstein*

### EMPLOYMENT

Assistant Professor of Humanities, New Jersey Institute of Technology, beginning fall 2009  
Adjunct Assistant Professor of Philosophy, St. John's University, 2008-2009

### EDUCATION

**PhD**, Philosophy, Pennsylvania State University, 2009, with doctoral minor in Social Thought  
**MA**, Philosophy, Pennsylvania State University, 2007  
**BA**, Philosophy, Columbia University, 2004, *summa cum laude* with departmental honors  
Deep Springs College, 1998-2000

### PUBLICATIONS

"Changing and Unchanging Conceptions of Information," forthcoming in *Glimpse*, the peer-reviewed journal of the Society for Phenomenology and Media (Spring 2009)  
"Merleau-Ponty Between Subjectivity and Power," review of *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics after Anti-Humanism*, by Diana Coole (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), *Theory and Event*, 11:3, 2008.  
"Rawls, Foucault, 50 Cent and Michael Moore on the Terms of Democratic Discourse," in *International Studies in Philosophy* 39.2

### SELECTED CONFERENCE PAPERS

"Indeterminacy and the Limits of Interpretation: Towards a Theory of Practical Social Action," at Penn State University, December 2008 and to be presented at the Saint John's University's Department of Philosophy's Research Colloquium, April 2009  
"Does Scholarly Knowledge Ruin Bodily Knowledge? On the Relationship between Embodied Understanding and Social Theory," accepted for presentation at the Eight Annual Graduate Student Conference at The New School for Social Research, "The Phenomenological Body, its Spaces and Limits," March 26-27, 2009  
"Conceptuality and Practical Action: A Critique of Charles Taylor's *Verstehen* Social Theory," accepted for presentation at the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Philosophy of Social Science Roundtable, March 20-22, 2009, Emory University  
"Bourdieu and the Origins of Distinction in Emergent Online Communities," at the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Graduate Humanities Forum at the University of Pennsylvania, February, 2008  
"Practices of Knowledge and Interpretation in Wikipedia and the Philosophe's *Encyclopédie*," at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference for the Society for Phenomenology and Media, February, 2008  
"Heidegger and Marcuse on Technology," at Reading Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization After 50 Years*, St. Joseph's University, October 2005

### GRANTS AND AWARDS

- Graduate Assistant Outstanding Teaching Award, sponsored by the Graduate School and the Office of the Vice President and the Dean for Undergraduate Education, Penn State University, 2007
- Twenty-Third Annual Graduate Exhibition, Penn State University, poster selected for presentation, "On the Hermeneutic Lag of Social Practices," 2007
- College of the Liberal Arts Dissertation Support Competition, Penn State University
- 2006-2007 Philosophy Department Teaching Award, Philosophy Department, Penn State University
- James and Viola Bartoo Graduate Fellowship, Penn State University, 2004
- Graduate Scholar Fellowship, Penn State University, 2004