

On the ethical significance of social practices

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Abstract: In *Practice Theory and International Relations*, Silviya Lechner and Mervyn Frost make a useful distinction between ‘praxis’ and ‘practices’ and correctly insist on the importance of describing the identity of distinct practices. They also make the important point that practices have ethical value for their participants. There is much to like about Lechner and Frost’s argument, including its solid philosophical grounding. However, from the perspective of a social scientist, there are some points of concern as well. First, while they champion ‘description’, they settle for ‘naming’ practices. Proper description requires more attention to detail than what the authors offer in the book. Second, the authors appear to discriminate between social practices in spatial terms rather than in functional terms. As a consequence, they end up with a description of the practices of international relations, where the different practices are all animated by the same value of freedom. As such, Lechner and Frost offer a reductionist interpretation of the ethical significance of international practices. Third, the authors push their anti-foundationalism too far. When one interprets the (ethical) significance of social practices, it is useful to bring on board philosophical–anthropological models, even if only because it opens up one’s interpretive horizons.

Keywords: practices; philosophical anthropology; descriptivism; social theory; IR Theory

I. Introduction

In *Practice Theory and International Relations*, Silviya Lechner and Mervyn Frost make a crucial distinction between *praxis* (action) and *practices* (domains of rule-governed activity in the context of which participants engage in practice-dependent action). They insist on the centrality of practices in social life and thus on the importance of studying practices in the study of social life. Their book presents an account of what practices are (domains of rule-governed activity) and of how to study them appropriately (internalistically). Their book also includes an account of – what its authors claim to be – the two core practices of contemporary international relations (sovereign states and global rights) and their dynamic interplay. The first part of the book is strongly

Oakeshottian in inspiration. The second part of the book draws most of its inspiration from GWF Hegel's political philosophy. Not quite surprisingly, given their Hegelian credentials, they find that the domain of international relations is animated by the value of freedom, although they do recognise that the realisation of freedom in international relations will necessarily remain incomplete.

I agree with the author's starting point. A few years ago, I wrote an article in which I argued that scholars propagating a practice turn for IR betray conceptual confusion when they fail to make the distinction between three concepts: *practice* ('all us of doing all of our doings'), *practical knowledge* ('my and your and his and her skill at doing what we do'), and *practices* ('the things that we do') (Kustermans 2016). My account of *practical knowledge* shows an affinity with Lechner's and Frost's account of *praxis*. My account of practices shows even greater affinity with their account of the same notion, but the two accounts do nonetheless not coincide. It is not just that their account has been elaborated more meticulously, although that is true as well. Their philosophical seriousness, I should admit, has me slightly worried about the impishness of my own definitions. However, a more substantive difference hides behind our shared anti-Bourdieuism and our shared commitment to the study of practices; a difference epitomised by their rooting their account in the philosophy of Michael Oakeshott and my grounding my account in Durkheimian sociology (cf. Kustermans 2019).

In this review, I want to tease out those differences. I want to comment on three elements of the authors' argument in particular: (1) the imperative to describe, their insistence that the study of practices must be a 'descriptivist' endeavour, (2) the author's identification of practices with domains, especially ethical domains, and (3) the limits of their commitment to a non-foundationalist stance. I will end this review with (4) questioning their rejection of social science. I think it is mistaken to argue that a social-scientific approach can never adequately account for practices. Rather, I will claim, the philosophical approach to practices that Lechner and Frost champion, including their commitment to disclosing the ethical importance of practices, would benefit from a more open engagement with certain, admittedly philosophically inclined, sociological approaches.

II. The imperative to describe

Practices, explain Lechner and Frost, are 'domains of interaction constituted by rules'. The purpose of a philosophical analysis of practices, they further explain, is to elucidate practices (16), to clarify what they are about, to 'explain' how they are organised. David Boucher (2018: 65)

observes similarly, but not quite identically, that ‘philosophy is the coming to know better something [say, a practice] that in some sense we already know’. Philosophy, on this view, explains phenomena, but not causally. It explains phenomena by laying bare their (shifting) nature, by disclosing the ‘rules’ that constitute them and the ‘values’ that animate them. As such, philosophy is first and foremost a descriptive endeavour. It describes phenomena (institutions, ideas, identities) and enriches our understanding of those phenomena by offering up a careful description of them. Our understanding enriched, we ought also to be in a better position to navigate our way about the phenomena in question. Even when it shuns outright prescription, when it settles for description, philosophy does clarify our operating environment for us and thus shows possible ways forward.

If description is the game, then ‘appropriate description’ (23) is its standard of excellence. The authors note that an endless variety of practices exist – ‘waging war, coffee drinking, writing a conference paper, attending global literary festivals’ (ibid) – and they correctly conclude that very little is shared among these practices in terms of the concrete doings and saying that make up the practice and not either in terms of the actual rules that constitute these diverse domains of activity. As a result, an appropriate description of a practice will want to grasp the precise identity of that practice and not settle for the lowest common denominator shared across practices. There simply is no meaningful lowest common denominator. Each practice has to be described on its own terms.¹ This also means that in our description of practices we have to use a vocabulary that resonates with the practices’ participants. Our descriptions ought to be ‘internalist’ descriptions. As an example, they explain that rendering the ‘practice of diplomacy’ in more abstract terms as a ‘mode of conflict resolution’ or as ‘bargaining’ is to run a great risk of misrepresenting the identity of the practice. They are inappropriate, overly theoretical, re-descriptions.

Drawing up an ‘appropriate description’ – a description attuned to the experience of the practice by its participants – requires that one identifies the rules that constitute the practice and that define intelligible action within it. It probably also entails, although Lechner and Frost do not mention this very explicitly, that one identifies the values that animate those rules and thus the practice. Participants experience a practice, after all, in terms of the rules that they know themselves to be following (and appropriating) but also in terms of the values that they know themselves

¹ I agree, but Lechner’s and Frost’s own account does make one wonder if there is not stronger similarity across social practices when it comes to the performance of practice-dependent action. Do not we observe ‘rule-following’ and, more importantly, ‘rule-acceptance’ in the waging of war much as in the drinking of coffee?

and their fellow-participants to be committed to. Their constitutive rules and their animating values make for the ‘identity’ of practices. However, because practices exist in a world of other practices and often brush shoulders with those other practices, it can be difficult to grasp their separate identities. In this regard, and in the absence of ‘bedrock metaphysical properties’ that sustain practices, Lechner and Frost propose a strategy of comparison, which involves the comparison of two (and, at any one point, no more than two) putatively distinct practices. ‘Comparing two intelligible, concrete identities yields an intelligible result that also means something concrete’ (54).

As an example they mention the possibility of comparing ‘voting’ with ‘chess playing’ or, I think more meaningfully, ‘chess playing’ with ‘football playing’. The procedure will remind the Durkheimian sociologist of Durkheim’s explication of ‘religion’ by means of a comparison with ‘magic’ or Mauss’s explication of ‘modern personhood’ by means of a comparison with ‘primitive personhood’. Comparison, it should be clear, affords description. Comparison, that is, affords, the identification of a practice’s distinctive or concrete identity. And the identification of a concrete identity, the authors make an important additional observation, still very much in agreement with the authors, affords the identification of change (85).

In general terms, there is little that I disagree with here. However, I do feel that Lechner’s and Frost’s brand of descriptivism does not quite live up to its promise and I think that the reason is that their brand of descriptivism is insufficiently descriptive. The linguist John Carroll (1980) has made a useful distinction between ‘naming’ an object and ‘describing’ that same object. A ‘name’ designates an object in as pointed a fashion as possible (typically one word), while a ‘description’ of the same object would be more elaborate and, in its elaboration, attempt to convey a ‘sense’ of the object. A description brings an object before the senses. It makes the object tangible even in its absence. This is not possible without sufficient attention to detail. Carroll (1980: 310–11) explains that ‘naming’ typically substitutes for ‘describing’ as a communication situation evolves. Objects gradually lose their unfamiliarity and thus a shortened description now suffices for communication to work, for an object to be brought before the senses. If things are familiar and known to all, we can suffice with naming them. If things are unfamiliar and we still need to achieve an agreement on what they are about, we need to describe them more elaborately. However, if things are too familiar, if, to repeat David Boucher’s words, ‘in a sense, we know them already’, but we – some of us, the philosophically minded – judge that we have grown complacent about our knowledge of them, we might proceed to make things less familiar

again, so that, in the future, we might ‘know them better’ as a result. To this end, we should not render them in disembodied theoretical terms, but we should return to description; to a description of the details of the things [the practices] in question. Lechner’s and Frost’s ‘description’ of the ‘practice of sovereign states’ and the ‘practice of global rights’ hovers rather close to ‘naming’ the practice (and ‘naming’ its constitutive rules). As a result, it risks repeating relatively commonplace interpretations of those practices (as expressions of freedom). A commitment to internalism, if it is not to be reduced to a commitment to common sense, ought to be wedded to a commitment to rich description – as rich as possible – of the ‘doings and sayings’ that instantiate the practice.² Only detailed description affords the philosophical promise that we may ‘come to know better something that in some sense we already knew’.

III. Social spheres and social practices

As I have already mentioned, Lechner and Frost define ‘a practice,’ at its most basic, as ‘a common domain of interaction constituted by rules’ (34). A more elaborate version of the same definition holds that ‘a practice’ is ‘a distinctive domain of rule-following activity, defined by concrete constitutive rules and espoused as a common understanding by a group of participants’ (115). About the rules that constitute a practice, the authors clarify that they do not specify *what* people should do, but rather *how* they ought to do it. The rules of ceremonial tea-drinking do not necessarily enjoin one to drink tea, but they do instruct the participants in the ceremony on how, if one were to drink tea, to prepare and pour tea during the ceremony and how, more generally, to conduct themselves during the ritual. About the participants in a practice, Lechner and Frost prefer a broad over a narrow definition. They include as a participant in a practice not only those who are performing it, not only those taking centre stage, but equally those not directly involved in the action, as long as such onlookers attribute value to the practice. As long as people express concern about how a practice is being performed (i.e., whether performance happens in accordance with the rules constituting the practice), they count as participants in a practice, even when they are not performing

² As an example consider the literature on gift-giving. Lechner and Frost rightly point out that Bourdieu’s engagement with Mauss’s essay is annoyingly reductionist, because it domineeringly imposes a theoretical template on it. But compare Annette Weiner’s (1995) engagement with the essay. She carefully describes the nature of the objects being exchanged and thus manages to offer up a new interpretation of the practice (arguing that it concerns the establishment of relations of authority as much as relations of solidarity).

it themselves. On this view, diplomats and statespeople participate in the practice of sovereign states, but so do journalists and ultimately also the citizenry.

Lechner and Frost are inclined to identify ‘practices’ with ‘non-instrumental practices’. They mobilise Oakeshott’s distinction between ‘purposive associations’ and ‘practical associations’. With purposive associations, members seek to achieve a goal external to the association and try to do so efficiently. With practical associations, the association and its activity – its existence and its performance – is the goal itself. Efficiency does not come into play much, but such considerations as (genuine) ‘acceptance’ [Lechner and Frost’s word], ‘respect’ [a Durkheimian notion] and ‘excellence’ [Alasdair Macintyre’s concept] do. People participate in practical associations [in practices, that is] because they value them for their own sake and because it confers on them ‘identity’. Note, in this latter regard, that identity does not feature in their argument in the Bourdieusian sense of ‘distinction’, but features in the Hegelian sense of ‘ethical status’. Participating in a practice, on this view, confers identity on its participants because those participants know themselves to be participating in a valuable practice; in modern times, according to Hegel, because they know that participation in practices constitutes them as self-conscious actors and affords them the experience of freedom.

I have two worries about this definition of practices and the interpretation of their significance. First, there is something uncomfortably spatial about their concept of practices. Practices are presented as ‘domains of activity’. The use of the word (‘domain’) here is obviously figurative. More important, therefore, is that when they discuss the relationship between the core practices of international relations, they have one core practice (global civil society) encompass the other core practice (the system of sovereign states). In this they follow Hegel, who portrayed civil society as encompassing the family and the state as encompassing civil society. Lechner and Frost simply add two layers. They explain that the system of sovereign states encompasses the state and that global civil society (fails to) encompass the system of sovereign states. The spatial imagination is obvious. In this context, it is significant that, to my knowledge, Hegel never referred to the family, civil society or the state as ‘practices’ but rather named them ‘social spheres’ (a spatial metaphor, again).³ The trouble is this: because of this spatial conceptualisation of supposedly distinct practices (cf. previous section), one gets the impression that they are not ultimately distinct practices at all. As Frederick Neuhouser (2009: 221) observes about Hegel’s three social spheres: they all serve

³ For an interesting discussion of spatial metaphors in social theory, cf. Silber (1995)

the cause of material reproduction and they all serve the cause of freedom. But if all three – nay, all five – spheres have the same function, then in what sense are they really distinct practices? Would it not be more useful to distinguish ‘practices’ in functional terms rather than in spatial terms and thus, for instance, make a distinction between ‘ethical practices’, ‘political practices’ and ‘social practices’? One could potentially read ‘sovereignty’ or ‘summitry’ or ‘diplomacy’ as an ‘ethical’, ‘political’, or as a ‘social’ practice. As a matter of fact, our descriptions of them should probably serve to determine what kind of practice they actually are. On my understanding, to simply presume that a certain practice is an ethical practice (in the Hegelian sense of that term) sits ill with the methodological descriptivism and internalism that Lechner and Frost advocate. Categorising practices in functional terms and thus being attentive to the existence of different *kinds* of practices (ethical, social, political) should make it easier to stay true to Lechner and Frost’s methodological precepts. And this, in turn, should afford us more readily to disclose the more unfamiliar aspects of what it is that we do when we do international relations.

In this context, I am also inclined to push back against the authors’ preference to identify practices with encompassing ‘domains’ (or ‘spheres’) and ultimately even with so-called ‘forms of life’. Is the state really a practice? It may be a practical *association*, but is it really a practice? ‘Gift-giving’ is a practice, but is it really meaningful to identify ‘the economy’ as a practice? Does it not make more sense to identify ‘the economy’ as a ‘domain’ or ‘sphere’ and to identify ‘gift-giving’ as a practice (supposedly) within that domain or sphere? This matters, I think, for two reasons. First, there is the distinct possibility of there being crucial social practices that mediate the relationship between separate spheres, without themselves constituting a new domain. The spatial metaphor matters again: the existence of a domain would appear to presuppose relative fixity and continuity. Spheres and domains are bounded in space but continuous in time. Practices, and certainly their performance in time, are bounded in time even if they recur across space. Feasting would be a good example of a practice that is not a domain. Second, drawing the analytical distinction between ‘domains’ and ‘practices’ sheds alternative light on the possible ethical significance of practices. It multiplies the possible interpretations thereof. Other than constituting participants’ identity (as self-conscious actors that experience freedom), one can also hypothesise that the participation in certain social practices – not in domains, but in practices, the concrete acting out of particular, more or less choreographed, doings and sayings – affords the experience of solidarity, whereas the participation in other social practices affords the experience of transcendence.

Both experiences have, in my opinion, clear ethical significance, as does, I would not dream of denying, the experience of freedom.

IV. The limits of non-foundationalism

Lechner and Frost mention at a number of points that their approach to practices eschews the search for foundations. A first mention of their commitment to non-foundationalism comes early in the book when they clarify that their hermeneutical stance concerns foremost an epistemological commitment and thus does not partake of the phenomenological tradition in hermeneutics, ‘where the phenomenology (lived experiences) of the subject is to be understood by an ultimate appeal to the “primordial” structures of “Being”’ (9). A second mention comes when they clarify their opposition to explanatory, social-scientific approaches. They write, with obvious disapproval, that ‘explanation presupposes a search for foundations, first principles, essences or anything that underpins the identity under scrutiny’ (16). The type of explanation that they target here, it appears, is an ‘explanation’ such as that of Bourdieu which interprets all practices (sic) in social-strategic terms. Another context in which they insist on the absence of foundations is when they discuss those ‘identities’ that only exist because of the constitutive rules of practices. ‘Such rule-dependent identities’, explain the authors, ‘are not just theatre masks; for the players who endorse them, nothing more solid, true or objective lies behind these identities’ (103). And finally, when Lechner and Frost sketch out the contours of the two core practices of international relations, about which they find that they are animated by the value of freedom, they insist that their approach remains non-foundational, that ‘they do not start by building a bedrock theory of morality [...] from the bottom up and for which they [would] then seek confirmation in actual social facts. Our practice-based analysis operates in the reverse’, they continue, ‘it starts with the interpretation of social facts and seeks to render these facts coherent’ (144).

The authors’ non-foundationalism seems comprehensive, although there is one moment in *Practice Theory and International Relations* in which the authors appear to abandon their commitment to sheer elucidation and thus their rejection of foundationalism. This happens when they reflect on the dialectical relation that binds together (and propels ‘forward’) the society of sovereign states and global civil society. During that discussion they oppose the emergence of a world state, not only because the prospect is implausible,⁴ but equally because, on their view,

⁴ For the opposite view that the formation of a world state is inevitable, also grounded in a version of Hegelian dialectics, cf. Wendt (2003).

the prospect is undesirable.⁵ I fail to understand how one can argue against a world state on normative grounds without a transcendental commitment to one or the other value (*in casu*: freedom, including the freedom of states). Otherwise, why not let the dialectal process run its course? Why not let it take us wherever its dynamic leads us?

But I do not want to make more of the inconsistency than is necessary and it certainly does not put into doubt their overall commitment to a non-foundationalist stance. As a matter of fact, it is not the minor inconsistency that I worry about, but rather the absoluteness of the commitment itself. Their commitment takes away valuable interpretive tools. Its lead them to ignore a variety of possible interpretations of the meaning – of the distinct, of the concrete meaning – of practices. The analysis of social practices often benefits from the consideration of anthropological foundations in particular. The argument is emphatically not that we should *posit* a simple, one-sided understanding of ‘human nature’ and take that as *the* key to explaining social practices. Rather, what I argue is that we should *take* the existence of anthropological foundations *seriously* and that we should try to achieve a provisional grasp of them, with due attention to human nature’s multi-dimensionality (cf. Lloyd 2015: 40). The better our grasp of (the multi-dimensionality) of such foundations, provisional though it must remain, the more refined and the more revelatory will be our interpretations of the (possible) meaning of social practices.

Consider more closely Lechner’s and Frost’s argument about how constitutive rules create identities and ‘how nothing more solid, true or objective lies behind these identities’ (103). They make this argument with reference to the game of chess and the ‘identities’ of the different pieces in that game. The rook, they explain by means of example, has the right of lateral movement only because the rules of the game decide it so. Its identity is fully rule-dependent and thus any action by a player within the game of chess fully rule-governed. We cannot make sense of the game without reference to the rules *and* we need little more than the rules in order to make sense of the game. There is no use invoking ‘anthropological foundations’ or any such like. The point is well-taken.

But compare the figure of the diplomat. It is not difficult to agree that a person counts as a diplomat only to the extent that s/he performs actions that we recognise as diplomatic action and that we recognise as *particularly* diplomatic action those actions that have been defined so – historically, inter-subjectively – within the practice of diplomacy. It is neither difficult to agree that people, once socialised into the practice of diplomacy, come to value the practice and feel a commitment to it (rule-acceptance) and,

⁵ For the opposite viewpoint, e.g., Craig (2018).

again, that understanding this does not require any commitment to anthropological foundations. And yet, when Nicholas Onuf, in *World of Our Making*, examines the practice of diplomacy (and that of soldiering and lawyering, of manufacturing, and of prophesying), a lot of the force of his argument derives from his interpretation of these practices, not exclusively in terms of the rules that constitute them (as one might have expected from a protagonist of rule-based constructivism), but equally in terms of alleged ‘cognitive universals’ (our capacity for deduction, induction, and abduction). Onuf suggests that these three modes of reasoning have universal validity: all societies appreciate them, all people are capable of them. But Onuf also suggest that many societies have institutionalised these three modes of reasoning, typically in separate institutions. He speaks of ‘ancestral institutions’ and mobilises evidence for their recurrence in so-called Indo-European Society (Onuf 2013: 107). They are: soldiering and diplomacy (deduction), hunting and gathering (induction), and conjecture and ceremony (abduction). By grouping diplomacy with soldiering, and by associating both primarily with deductive reasoning, Onuf says something (1) meaningful about the identity of diplomacy by (2) relating the practice to an anthropological universal, without, however, positing a singular, Bourdieusian ‘logic of practice’. Quite the opposite.

One might notice, in this context, that such desire to interpret social practices in philosophical–anthropological terms does not express the eccentric disposition of an admittedly idiosyncratic thinker (Onuf). I can equally point to the scholarship of Reinhart Koselleck (2011, 2018), a founder of the project of conceptual history (*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*) and a foremost theorist of conceptual change, but who nonetheless felt it necessary to develop a so-called *Historik*, a theory of possible histories, which he centred on the universal and embodied experience of three binaries (earlier–later, above–below, inside–outside).⁶ Any concept, any practice, wagered Koselleck, concerns the mediation of a tension that these experiences, separate or in conjunction, give occasion to. One fails to understand the meaning of social phenomena – their meaning-as-experienced – if one does not interpret them in light of such (or similar) categories. Notice, finally, that a similar idea was expressed by the philosopher Peter Winch, whom Lechner and Frost rightly claim as a source of inspiration. Notwithstanding his general, non-foundationalist commitments, at the end of his ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’, Winch

⁶ One easily imagines the latter two categories as keys for the interpretation of diplomacy. For an account of diplomacy primarily in terms of inside–outside, cf. Der Derian (1987). For an account of diplomacy primarily in terms of above–below, cf. Leira (2019).

(1964: 324) drew attention to the interpretive necessity of ‘limiting concepts’, mentioning sexual relations, marriage, and death as primordial examples. ‘It does not seem to me’, he elaborated,

a merely conventional matter that T.S. Elliot’s trinity of ‘birth, copulation, and death’ happen to be such deep objects of human concern. I do not mean that they are made such by fundamental psychological and sociological forces, though that is no doubt true. But I want to say further that the very notion of human life is limited by these notions.

What is the point of including Winch’s observation? It is this: when we analyse practices, we interpret their meaning. What Winch suggests, and Koselleck and Onuf and I and many others suggest with him, is that one cannot interpret the meaning of practices except in light of alleged anthropological universals. The meaning of words may lie exclusively in our use of them, and so may the meaning of the rules that are constitutive of practices and of identities within practices. But the argument does not apply to – does not suffice for – the understanding of the practices as such. That meaning is more embodied. We experience the meaning of social practices as we are performing them, with others, our bodies attuned to the bodies of others (Ringmar 2016). We also experience it, more cognitively, as we reflect on them and on their significance for ‘human life’. We – a ‘we’ which includes participants in the practice – understand their significance by relating them to anthropological universals – provisional, though, our grasp of these must remain.

V. Conclusion

Let me maybe conclude by stating that the project of social science does not coincide with its Bourdieusian strand. All of the observations that I made in the above paragraphs, I made as a social scientist. They are the observations of a social scientist. It is a social scientist’s disposition to insist (against the philosopher) on more detailed empirical description. Likewise, it is a (slightly old-fashioned) social scientist’s reflex to discriminate between social practices in terms of the functions they fulfil and to be sceptical about the overly coherent, Hegelian interpretation of the ethics that animate social practices. Finally, it is certainly a social scientist’s habit to want to explain social practices by grounding them in an extralinguistic reality, much as it is only the social scientist (more readily than the philosopher) who would rest content with pursuing a ‘provisional grasp’ of anthropological foundations.

Maybe, then, the above paragraphs could have been written by a social scientist only, as they were. But notice two things: (1) very little of what

I wrote contradicts the fundamental tenets of Lechner's and Frost's *Practice Theory*. And what is more: (2) some of what I wrote promises to contribute to their very project, to wit, to examine the 'meaning' of the core social practices of international relations and to assess their ethical significance. It should inspire people who share in their project to think anew about what those practices are and what it means and takes to lay bare their meaning. As to their ethical significance, it warns against identifying 'freedom' as the sole ethical value. I do not actually think that Silviya Lechner and Mervyn Frost would ever claim so. The trouble is, however, that their Hegelian reconstruction of the core practices of international relations leads them to give the impression that it is. A touch of (Durkheimian) social science would have helped them avoid that situation.

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