THE PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL PRACTICES

A Collective Acceptance View

BY

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Contents

Figures

Introduction

It is acknowledged in philosophical and theoretical writings concerning the basic nature of the social world that social practices are central elements of "forms of life" and, consequently, of social life. Nevertheless, very little serious analytical work concerning social practices and, for that matter, social institutions exists in philosophy or elsewhere. The present work aims at remedying this situation. The novel approach taken in this book is called the "Collective Acceptance" account, and it is heavily based on "*shared we-attitudes*," which represent a weak form of collective intentionality (or "social representations," in social psychology terminology). As a slogan, "we-attitudes drive human life."

There are several good reasons for embarking on a conceptual and philosophical study of social practices. The deepest sense is that they form the conceptual basis of thinking and other conceptual activities, viz., thinking and acting on the basis of concepts. They can be regarded as conceptually crucial in that they – or rather some fundamental kinds of them – can in themselves be meaningful, "rock-bottom" activities. Furthermore, it can be argued that the concept of correctness of such activities as rule following and in general rational conceptual activities crucially depend on the social practices of the community in question and that basic social practices are a kind of irreducible and noncircular conceptual *fundamentum* of conceptual activities. If this is right – a mild version of this view will indeed be adopted in this work – the notion of a social practice is central not only for social science and the philosophy of social science, but for systematic philosophy in general. Secondly, social life centrally contains recurrent social activities – social practices such as business practices, educational, religious, and political practices – as everyone knows from one's own experience. Social practices thus are part of the domain of investigation of social studies and therefore are also a philosopher's concern. Included here is also the study of multiagent systems in artificial intelligence, insofar as it attempts to capture – even

approximately – the important aspects of the social world. Thirdly, as many sociologists have argued, social practices are de facto central for the creation, maintenance, and renewal of social systems and structures.

All the above-mentioned themes will be taken up in the present systematic philosophical work, which in a self-contained way constructs the central notions needed for its topic. The most central – and novel – claim of this book is that collective intentionality in the form of shared we-attitudes is constitutive of standard social practices and social institutions. Underlying this central theme, and closely related to it, is the thesis that collective intentionality is also central for the ontology of the social world in that a central part of the social realm is collectively constructed in terms of collective acceptance, understanding collective acceptance in terms of coming to hold and holding a we-attitude. This I call the *wide program of social constructivism* in this book and is, of course, to be understood strictly in terms of the theory created rather than in terms of any preconceived views on social construction. Philosophically, the most central chapters of the book are 4–6, which develop the main theory of collective sociality and defend the wide program of constructivism. The book also, and most importantly, defends the *narrow program of constructivism*, according to which collective intentionality in terms of shared we-attitudes in part constitute social practices in the core sense, which in turn are central for the conceptual construction and factual maintenance of social institutions.

The Collective Acceptance account of this book is based on three central features, the third of which has not been made use of in the literature. The first feature is that many social entities and their characteristics are performatively constructed by the group members. For example, they may collectively bring it about that certain pieces of paper qualify as money. Secondly, institution concepts have been regarded as self-referring (reflexive) – thus greenbacks are not money unless collectively accepted to be money. Although the features of performativity and reflexivity have been considered earlier, precise analyses of them seem not to exist. I will try to improve the situation in this book. My account adds another aspect of sociality, the "we-mode" aspect, which relates to the idea of thinking and acting as a group member. We may distinguish between attitudes and actions in the "I-mode" and those in the we-mode (thinking and acting as a group member with proper "collective" commitment). Thus a we-mode attitude involves thinking and acting from the group's perspective, and such activities are meant for the use of members. The members are collectively committed to the content of

the attitude, whereas the I-mode lacks the mentioned two features of we-modeness and concerns basically the agent's self-directed (but possibly altruistic) benefit (or "utility") and action. There can be social practices in either mode, but we-mode practices are anyhow central especially for institutional practices.

The kind of collective acceptance that is needed for the conceptual construction of such central notions as social institutions can then be explicated basically as holding, and acting on, either a collective intention (viz., we-intention) or a collective belief (viz., we-belief) in the we-mode. This entails that collective intentionality in the form of shared we-attitudes has a central place in the theoretical analysis of social life. We-attitudes of these kinds are the underlying building blocks of social practices, and they are also causally relevant to the initiation and maintenance of both social practices and social institutions. Social practices include a variety of cases, for example organic farming, wearing blue jeans, eating with the fork in one's right hand, or various teaching practices in schools. A social practice in its core sense is taken to consist of recurrent collective social actions performed for a shared social reason, expressed in the collective attitude (viz., shared we-attitude) underlying the social practice. A shared we-attitude represents the (or at least *a*) standard kind of collective intentionality. The idealized, "pure" notion is this: a person has a we-attitude A (say a goal, intention, or belief) if he has A, believes that the others in his collective (group) have A and believes in addition that there is a mutual belief in the collective that the members have A.

Basically, the notion of a social institution (in a general sense) is a reflexive notion concerning a core social practice or practices governed by a system of norms based on collective acceptance for the group's benefit and use. The collective acceptance in question confers a new conceptual and social status on the practices or on some items that they involve (cf. the case of money). It is argued in detail in this book that social institutions must involve we-mode activities and not only I-mode activities. Social institutions in the sense of organizations are treated in precise mathematical terms in the final chapter.

The "big picture" that emerges from the account given in this book is this: "jointness" notions involving collective intentionality, especially shared we-attitudes (of which joint intentions and mutual beliefs represent special cases), together with collective and joint action form an "interrelationistic" basis for the conceptual and ontological construction of the social world, or at least its artificial parts. The account makes

use of some presumably irreducible social notions. Especially the notion of we-mode attitude (and action) is to some extent a holistic notion, although its primary area of application is the "jointness" level. In current social science jointness factors tend not to be taken seriously into account. Thus, accounts of institutions tend to ignore joint intentions, wants, beliefs, and actions. To account for jointness, nevertheless, no social macronotions (e.g., social structures) need to be postulated in an ontologically committing sense, even if in a sense holistic concepts (basically we-mode concepts) are needed. The account of human and social agency on which the account ultimately relies is a mental-causationist and realist one. The kind of constructivism involved in collective acceptance does not extend to the physical world in an ontological sense.

Over and above their intrinsic importance, the detailed analyses of the key notions of social life given here are relevant and important both for normative work, for example in ethics and political philosophy, and for theory-building and empirical research in the social sciences. The theoretical framework created in this book should be of interest also to researchers in the field of distributed artificial intelligence (DAI). Both researchers and graduate students in philosophy and in neighboring fields of study should accordingly find the book to be of interest, as it contains a new theory of social practices and institutions based on a well-developed account of collective intentionality.