

What are Social Practices?

Michael Esfeld

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Abstract

In the framework of the current revival of Wittgenstein's later philosophy as well as American pragmatism, social practices are seen as determining the conceptual content of our beliefs. This position amounts to an inferential semantics with inferential relations supervening on social norms and these norms, in turn, supervening on normative attitudes. The paper elaborates on the distinction between social practices and social behaviour. Three conceptions of social practices are considered: (1) social practices as being reducible to social behaviour; (2) social norms as constituting some sort of a link between physical and intentional states because the normative sphere has a wider scope than the conceptual sphere; and (3) the self-sufficiency of social practices in the sense that the normative and the conceptual sphere are identical and self-contained.

Key words: social practices, norms, beliefs, social behaviour

Resumen

En el marco del actual renacimiento de la filosofía del último Wittgenstein y del pragmatismo americano, las prácticas sociales se consideran como determinación del contenido conceptual de nuestras creencias. Esta posición suma una semántica deductiva a las relaciones deductivas que sobrevienen en las normas sociales y estas normas, a su vez, sobrevienen en las actitudes normativas. El artículo estudia la distinción entre las prácticas sociales y el compartimento social. Se examinan tres conceptos de prácticas sociales: (1) las prácticas sociales se reducidas a comportamiento social; (2) las normas sociales como fundamento de cierta forma de engarce entre los estados físicos e intencionales, porque la esfera normativa tiene un alcance más amplio que la esfera conceptual; y (3) la autosuficiencia de las [20] prácticas sociales, en el sentido de que la esfera normativa y la conceptual son idénticas y autónomas.

Palabras clave: prácticas sociales, normas, creencias, compartimento social.

1. *The function of social practices*

The notion of social practices is at the core of the revival that Wittgenstein's later philosophy as well as American pragmatism currently enjoy. One central idea is that, insofar as our beliefs have a determinate meaning at all, that meaning is due to social practices. In his interpretation of the *Philosophical Investigations* of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), Saul Kripke (1982) elaborates on what is known as the problem of rule-following. Based on an analysis of this problem, he claims (a) that there are no mental or physical facts that predetermine the meaning of our beliefs prior to our use of concepts in a social community, (b) that meaning is in a certain sense normative and (c) that its normative character can only be understood as consisting in certain attitudes that we adopt to each other. Kripke's book sparked a discussion on the social, pragmatic and normative nature of meaning, which is going on until today.

In the late nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties, Hilary Putnam took up both the American pragmatism of Charles S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey as well as Wittgenstein's later philosophy and proposed a social, pragmatic theory of meaning together

with a refined version of common sense realism (see in particular the essays in Putnam 1990 and 1994). Furthermore, Richard Rorty has advocated since more than two decades a pragmatic attitude not only towards meaning, but also towards truth as well as towards philosophy as a whole (see in particular Rorty 1980 and 1982). Putnam's and Rorty's work contributed greatly to the renewed interest in pragmatism in today's American philosophy.

[21] The idea that the meaning of our beliefs is determined by social practices has wider repercussions. It implies social holism in the sense that a person considered in isolation cannot be a thinking being; insofar as we are thinking beings, we are dependent on the interaction with other persons in a social community. Donald Davidson, for one, has since long set out a theory according to which mutual interpretation is necessary for having beliefs (see in particular the essays in Davidson 1984). This position is also known as interpretationism: We are thinking beings because we engage in social practices of mutual interpretation (see Child 1994).

The aim of this paper is to enquire into the way in which we should conceptualise social practices if they are to fulfil the function of determining the meaning of our beliefs. I will present three different views of social practices and discuss their merits and demerits. It is not the purpose of this paper to argue for one particular conception of social practices. My intention is to bring out the problems that have to be solved in order to further elaborate on the idea that we are thinking beings because we engage in social practices.

To start with, let us briefly recall the problem of rule-following, which is the main motivation for setting out a theory of meaning in terms of social practices. If a person masters a certain concept *F*, she has the capacity to apply this concept to an indeterminate number of new situations. For instance, if a person masters the concept "tree", she knows in any new situation when it is correct to say of something "This is a tree". We can put this matter in this way: By mastering a concept, a person follows a rule that determines what is correct and what is incorrect in employing the concept in question. The rule determines which concept the person masters. Consequently, it determines the meaning or the conceptual content of the beliefs in which the concept in question is employed. (For the purpose of this paper, I shall employ the terms "meaning" and "conceptual content" in an interchangeably; furthermore, by "content", I always mean "conceptual content", unless otherwise specified).

[22] Wittgenstein (1953: in particular §§ 138–242) shows the following: There is nothing mental (such as mental ideas or representations) and nothing physical (such as brain states or dispositions to behaviour) that could as such go beyond itself and determine how a concept is to be employed in new situations. There are infinitely many logically possible rules that any such mental or physical item satisfies. Wittgenstein maintains that any mental representation, any disposition to behaviour, etc. can guide our thought only if it is interpreted in a certain manner. However, since any such thing is finite, any such thing can be interpreted in infinitely many different logically possible ways. The problem of rule-following therefore is this one: How can a finite thinking being follow a particular rule – and thus have beliefs with a determinate conceptual content – instead of her beliefs having infinitely many conceptual contents so that they mean in fact nothing at all and are no beliefs?

If we conclude from the problem of rule-following that the conceptual content of our beliefs does not consist in some sort of a predetermined fact, it is something that we make ourselves by forming concepts and beliefs. This idea amounts to the programme to base semantics – the theory of meaning or conceptual content – on pragmatics, the theory of the

use of concepts. The problem of rule-following provides us with two guidelines as to what a pragmatics that accounts for conceptual content has to be like:

- a) It has to be a *normative pragmatics*. For a pragmatics that simply describes facts of the use of concepts would not be able to fulfil the task of explaining how mastering concepts includes the capacity to apply concepts correctly to an indefinite number of new situations.
- b) It has to be a *social pragmatics*. For a person considered in isolation does not have a criterion to distinguish between the correct and the incorrect use of a concept at her disposal (see in particular Wittgenstein 1953: § 202). If there were a mental or a physical fact that could provide a person considered in isolation with such a criterion, then there would be a mental or a physical fact that determines meaning prior to use.

[23] Wittgenstein (1953) and Kripke (1982: chapter 3) can be read as arguing that social practices are necessary in order to (a) determine a content for the beliefs of a person given the infinitely many logically possible contents of anything finite and (b) enable a person to have a distinction between the correct and the incorrect use of a concept at her disposal.

According to this position, it is inappropriate to distinguish between a belief state and a belief in the sense of a proposition that is the object of the belief state, that bears the conceptual content and that mediates between the belief state and what it is in the world that the belief state is about (for a forceful attack on such a view, see Travis 2000: in particular chapters 1–4). Belief states – and intentional states in general – are states that have a conceptual content, and they are immediately about something in the world. There is no content apart from the intentional states in which persons are out there for them to be grasped.

The most elaborate version of a normative, social and pragmatic theory of content to date is the book *Making It Explicit* by Robert Brandom (1994). Consider a situation in which a person makes a claim such as the claim that the New Year's Concert of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra is world-famous. Brandom (1994: chapter 1) distinguishes three types of norms under which a person puts herself by making a claim of the type *p*:

- a) *commitment*: Making a claim of the type *p* commits a person to a number of other claims. For instance, if one claims that the New Year's Concert of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra is world-famous, one is committed to the claim that there is a New Year's Concert in Vienna.
- b) *entitlement*: Making a claim of the type *p* entitles a person to a number of other claims. The claim that the New Year's Concert of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra is world-famous entitles one to the claim that international media will broadcast this concert. If the latter claim is challenged, the former claim can be given as a reason for the latter claim.
- c) [24] *precluded entitlement*: Making a claim of the type *p* precludes the entitlement to a number of other claims. Claiming that the New Year's Concert of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra is world-famous precludes one from being entitled to claim that the Vienna Philharmonic is a provincial orchestra.

According to Brandom, we are beings that are in intentional states with a determinate content, because we engage in practices of treating each other as being committed to and entitled to certain claims and actions. We can switch in this position between talking in terms of beliefs and talking in terms of claims that people make, because only the linguistic expression of a belief by making a claim can determine content by determining relations of commitment, entitlement and precluded entitlement. The meaning of sentences and the content of beliefs

are fixed both at once by relations of commitment, entitlement and precluded entitlement to the extent that they are fixed at all. Concepts are thus identical with predicates employed in making claims.

These norms of commitment, entitlement and precluded entitlement are determined in concrete situations of the application of the concepts in question. One can thus distinguish between two factors in which the content of a belief or the meaning of a claim of the type “This is *F*” consists: (a) appropriate circumstances of the application of the concept *F* by forming a belief or making a claim of the type “This is *F*”; (b) to which other beliefs or claims (and actions) one is committed, entitled and precluded from being entitled by having the belief or making the claim that something is *F*.

The route from pragmatics to semantics consists in translating these pragmatic norms into inferential relations among beliefs or claims, thereby getting to an inferential semantics (see Brandom 1994: chapter 2):

- a) From *commitment* to *entailment*: There are beliefs or claims that are *entailed* by *p* in the sense that they can be deduced from *p*.
- b) From *entitlement* to *support*: There are beliefs or claims that are *supported* by *p* in the sense that *p* supports an induction to them.
- [25] c) From *precluded entitlement* to *exclusion*: There are beliefs or claims that are *excluded* by *p* in the sense that endorsing *p* precludes one from endorsing them.

That is to say: Content or meaning consists in inferential relations among beliefs or sentences. These inferential relations are hooked on the world because they are determined by normative practices in concrete situations of the application of the concepts in question. These inferential relations supervene on the norms of commitment, entitlement and precluded entitlement. These norms, in turn, supervene on normative attitudes of taking one another to be committed to, entitled to and precluded from being entitled to certain claims and actions. Brandom (1994: in particular chapter 3) portrays these practices in terms of deontic scorekeeping. Furthermore, the description of content in the sense of these inferential relations can in principle be reduced to a description of these normative attitudes of attributing commitments, entitlements and precluded entitlements to one another. In that sense, meaning can be regarded as normative.

Conceptual content cannot be made entirely explicit: One cannot enumerate the commitments, entitlements and precluded entitlements that make up the content of a claim of the type *p*. One can only indicate a number of paradigmatic examples of such commitments, entitlements and precluded entitlements. Thus, the inferential context is open. Furthermore, it is not fixed once and for all: New experience in particular can have the consequence that new commitments and entitlements are recognized and some of the old ones are dropped. Meaning is thus in flux. There are no fixed identity conditions of content – neither in time nor at a time.

How do these normative practices avoid the problem of rule-following? To put it in a nutshell, the idea is this one: The practices of treating one another as being committed and entitled to certain claims and actions provide people with a practical knowledge in the sense of a knowledge which transitions from one particular normative attitude to other normative attitudes are appropriate, without these normative [26] attitudes having themselves to be the object of beliefs. These practices thereby give people the capacity to apply concepts correctly to an indeterminate number of new situations without any interpretation of a rule being

required. That practical knowledge is only accessible by participating in the practices in question.

Let us accept for the sake of this paper the described relation between a normative pragmatics and an inferential semantics. Let us focus on these questions: How do social practices achieve a determination of conceptual content? And how are these normative practices anchored in the natural world?

2. *From social behaviour to social practices*

Imagine a community of would-be rule-followers in a physical environment. There are a few proposals available in the literature that set out to show how we can get from the dispositions of these people to rule-following (see in particular Pettit 1993: 76–108 and Haugeland 1998: 147–150, 310–313). Taking these proposals into account, we can sum up in the following eight steps the main features of a model of social practices that determine content on the basis of the dispositions of people (compare Esfeld 2001: chapter 3.2):

1) The problem of rule-following shows that there are infinitely many logically possible ways to continue any finite sequence of whatever items. Each of these ways counts as going on in the same way according to one particular interpretation of what going on in the same way amounts to. However, these logical possibilities do not translate into real psychological options: If a person is confronted with a finite sequence of whatever items, there usually is one specific way in which the person is disposed to continue the sequence in question.

2) Persons who have the same biological equipment and who share a physical environment have by and large similar dispositions. If the dispositions of people were to a large extent bizarrely different (such as in the case which Kripke 1982: chapter [27] 2 imagines), a social practice that determines conceptual content could not get off the ground.

3) The dispositions of persons who have the same biological equipment and who share a physical environment include a disposition to coordinate at least parts of one's own behaviour with the behaviour of one's fellows. This is a second order disposition: It is a disposition to change some of one's dispositions and one's behaviour as a result of the behaviour of one's fellows, being directed at coordination. This change does not have to be a conscious process.

4) Owing to the disposition to at least partial coordination people react to each other's behaviour by applying sanctions in the sense of reinforcements or discouragements. They reinforce behaviour in others that agrees with their own behaviour, and they discourage behaviour in others that disagrees with their own behaviour.

5) Sanctions can get a process of determining content off the ground, because they make available for a person a distinction between correct and incorrect actions by introducing an external perspective: Owing to sanctions, there is a distinction between what a person takes to be correct or incorrect and what is correct or incorrect in the light of others.

6) Sanctions are a means to come to conditions under which persons agree in their ways of continuing a given sequence of whatever items. In the case of agreement, sanctions reinforce the dispositions of persons in the way in which they react to their environment. In the case of disagreement, sanctions in the form of discouragements trigger a process of finding out in practice the obstacles in the persons or in the environment that prevent agreement. That is to say: People react to disagreement in such a way that they take disagreement as a sign that something has gone wrong and that they have to do something in order to get things right. They try to find out why they disagree. In some cases – those ones which then lead to beliefs

about the environment with a determinate content – they discover conditions under which they [28] overcome their disagreement. These then are the normal conditions for a belief of a certain type. Sanctions thus induce a process of mutual adjustment that leads to convergence.

7) As a result of the process of coming to conditions under which persons agree, the rule can be conceived as that in which the convergence of persons in their ways of continuing a given sequence of whatever items consists.

8) Assessing each other's actions by means of sanctions determines a content for one rule only together with determining a content for an open-ended number of other rules; these other rules provide for an inferential context of the beliefs that are formed by following the rule in question.

This account presupposes that persons, like other living beings, have a cognitive access to their environment: They have to perceive their environment in order to be able to enter into interaction with other persons. One may speak of non-conceptual content with respect to this cognitive access. Furthermore, this account presupposes that agreement or disagreement in behaviour in the sense of reactions to the environment is transparent for the persons involved. Given the presupposed cognitive access and given that there can be no question of divergent intentions at this stage, this presupposition is unproblematic.

How shall we receive this account? First of all, it can be seen as indicating a supervenience basis for conceptual content: Not only does conceptual content in the sense of inferential relations supervene on norms of commitment, entitlement and precluded entitlement, and not only do these norms supervene on normative attitudes, but there is also a supervenience basis for the normative as a whole that can be fully described in non-normative vocabulary. That supervenience basis includes not only the dispositions of persons, but also the physical environment to which they respond. Since that environment cannot be exactly delimited, the sort of supervenience in question is global supervenience: Two worlds that are identical with respect to their non-intentional features (the [29] physical), are also identical with respect to their intentional features (the mental, including in particular the normative attitudes of persons and the conceptual content that supervenes on these attitudes). Consequently, there can be no difference in intentional features between two worlds without there being some physical difference.

Furthermore, this account shows that normative attitudes have a physical realization. Each token of a normative attitude has some sort of a physical realization, although that physical realization may not be limited to states of the body of the person in question: States of the body – brain states in particular – may realize certain normative attitudes only insofar as the person is embedded in a certain physical environment that includes other persons. If normative attitudes somehow depend on the make-up of the physical environment, so does their physical realization. This token physicalism fits into the lesson from the problem of rule-following: Assuming that there is anything mental that has an existence over and above the physical would run into the problem of rule-following.

The received view in today's philosophy of mind includes global supervenience and token physicalism in ontology, but it is opposed to reduction in epistemology: The description of intentional states in intentional, normative vocabulary cannot be reduced to a description in the non-intentional and non-normative vocabulary of the natural sciences. However, it is in dispute whether physicalism in ontology can go together with anti-reductionism in epistemology without further qualification. One can maintain that global supervenience and

token physicalism imply that it is in principle possible to describe intentional states in the non-intentional vocabulary that is applied to the supervenience basis. Nonetheless, since the sort of supervenience at issue is global supervenience and the point are relations to an environment that cannot be exactly delimited, such a description may very well be feasible only from God's point of view, but not for finite thinking beings in the world. However that may be, although the account sketched above is [30] committed to global supervenience and token physicalism, it does not necessarily imply that a reduction of the description of normative attitudes to a description of physical states of persons in a physical environment is available.

Nevertheless, the sketched account does more than just indicating a supervenience basis for normative attitudes. It locates the transition from social behaviour to social practices. What is described in step 3, a disposition to coordinate at least parts of one's own behaviour with the behaviour of one's fellows, is a necessary and sufficient condition for behaviour to be social behaviour. The crucial point then is step 4: sanctions. Sanctions in the sense of reinforcements or discouragements of certain sorts of behaviour are part of social behaviour. However, sanctions, even if they consist solely in physical reinforcements or discouragements of certain sorts of behaviour, can also be received in a normative way, namely as manifestations of normative attitudes of taking something to be correct or incorrect. Moreover, in a further step, sanctions are themselves liable to an assessment as being correct or incorrect, and they may consist solely in the attribution or the refusal of a certain normative status without any physical reinforcements or discouragements being involved. Sanctions in the normative sense are the key element of the story how conceptual content is determined by social practices. The transition from sanctions as purely physical reinforcements or discouragements to sanctions as manifestations of normative attitudes constitutes the transition from social behaviour to social practices. Social practices, in distinction to social behaviour, are characterized by normative attitudes.

The question is how we can further specify normative attitudes. Of course, there is a specification in normative vocabulary available – regarding one's own behaviour and the behaviour of others as correct or incorrect, knowing that one's own behaviour is subject to an assessment as being correct or incorrect by others, etc. The point at issue is whether the description of sanctions as [31] they figure in social behaviour can be worked out in such a way that it is possible to deduce the description of sanctions as they figure in social practices from that description – so that, in turn, it is possible to reduce the description of social practices to a description of social behaviour.

The point at issue is not that social practices evolve out of social behaviour. Of course they do. Ants and bees are social animals, but in distinction to human beings, they do not master concepts. Furthermore, the point at issue is not that one may describe the behaviour of ants, bees and other social animals to a certain extent in normative terms, too. Of course one may do so. But there is no need to do so. There is a satisfactory description of their behaviour in non-normative vocabulary available. When it comes to the self-conception of humans, by contrast, normative vocabulary is indispensable. The account sketched above is not intended to be a phylogenetic story about how humans come to be rational animals. It is far too simple and naïve to be that. Given that the ontological issue of token physicalism is not in dispute here, the point at issue is the epistemological one as to whether or not there is anything special about our self-conception: Is the normative vocabulary that we employ in our self-

conception irreducible? Or is there a story available that shows how this vocabulary can be reduced to a description of social behaviour?

The point at issue thus comes down to two options: (1) The one option is to pursue the strategy to reduce the description of social practices to a description of social behaviour. In this case, one has to elaborate on the account sketched above in such a way that the notion of sanctions in the normative sense is deduced from the notion of sanctions in the purely physical sense. That strategy amounts to a proposal for a straight, naturalistic solution to the problem of rule-following. Its main problem is to counter the arguments against the possibility of such a solution by Kripke (1982: chapter 2) and others.

(2) [32] The other option is to maintain that no reduction of the description of social practices to a description of social behaviour is available. One can then receive the account sketched above as showing how social practices can be integrated into the natural world, assuming that global supervenience and token physicalism are sufficient for that integration. Nevertheless, one has to say something more about what these practices are in order to make this position plausible. There are two types of accounts in this spirit in the literature; I shall consider them in the next two sections.

3. *Normative attitudes and conceptual content*

Assuming that the description of normative attitudes cannot be reduced to a description of social behaviour, one may nevertheless conceive normative attitudes as constituting the link between social behaviour and conceptual content. According to this view, normative attitudes have a wider scope than conceptual content: Not all normative attitudes consist in states that have a conceptual content. But all states that have a conceptual content are normative attitudes. Thus, the sphere of the normative so to speak is wider than the sphere of the conceptual; the conceptual is a proper part of the normative sphere. Insofar as this sphere is normative, its description cannot be reduced to a description in naturalistic vocabulary. Since this sphere is wider than the conceptual sphere, conceptual content can be conceived on this basis in a non-circular way: There is a reconstruction of conceptual content available that starts from normative attitudes which are not states that have a conceptual content. Hence, the description of states that have a conceptual content can be traced back to a description of states that are normative without being conceptual, but not to a description of non-normative states.

Accordingly, the practical knowledge which is indispensable to rule-following as explained in the first section is a sort of knowledge, because it is normative; but it is not conceptual yet. It [34] is a practical attitude to the world which is distinct from mere behaviour in that it is normative. This view of social practices as being normative without necessarily involving intentional states can explain why conceptual content cannot be made completely explicit: Conceptual content is determined by means of norms of commitment, entitlement and precluded entitlement; these norms cannot be completely enumerated because they consist in a non-conceptual practical knowledge.

One may associate this conception of social practices with Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (English translation Heidegger 1962). Heidegger can be read as holding that language and concepts derive from being-in-the-world in the sense of practical attitudes to the world that have a non-conceptual content and that can be evaluated in normative terms (see in particular Heidegger 1962: §§ 31–34 and compare Dreyfus 1991; but see also Brandom 1997,

who associates Heidegger with what will be described as the third view of social practices below).

The main problem for this view of social practices is to make plausible how something can be a norm without being in a position to be semantically evaluated, that is, without having a conceptual content. It seems that something is a norm if and only if it is subject to an evaluation as being correct or incorrect; and something is a normative attitude if and only if the being that has the attitude in question is able to distinguish between correct and incorrect attitudes. Being prepared to recognize an evaluation of something as being correct or incorrect implies being prepared to give on request a reason for judging something to be correct or incorrect. Accordingly, something is a norm if and only if a reason can be given for it. It can be maintained that this requirement implies that normative attitudes are identical with attitudes that have a conceptual content: If something meets this requirement, it has a conceptual content.

These considerations can be strengthened by taking into account what Wilfrid Sellars (1997) denounces as the “Myth of the Given”: [34] According to Sellars, it is a myth to suppose that there is something that is epistemic or normative without being conceptual. Sellars’ view can be summed up in this way: There are either dispositions to behaviour and the like that can be described in naturalistic vocabulary or normative attitudes that are conceptual. That is, anything that there is belongs either to the natural realm or the realm of giving and asking for reasons, as Sellars puts it. *Tertium non datur*.

The task for the second view of social practices considered in this section therefore is this one: Countering the arguments of Sellars among others one has to show how something can meet the criteria for being normative without thereby being conceptual. If one thinks that this cannot be done, there remains a third way to conceive social practices, namely to identify the sphere of the normative with the sphere of the conceptual.

4. *The self-sufficiency of social practices*

By social practices being self-sufficient, I mean the position that there is no possibility to derive or reconstruct the social practices of attributing normative attitudes, normative statuses and thereby beliefs to each other (in short, what Brandom calls deontic scorekeeping) by starting from something that is not itself normative and conceptual. That is to say: One can explain conceptual content by referring to normative attitudes of people assessing each other’s claims and actions as being correct or incorrect by taking each other to be committed to something, entitled to something and precluded from being entitled to something; but this explanation remains within the sphere of the conceptual. The knowledge of these commitments and entitlements is practical in the sense that there is no need to have beliefs about these commitments and entitlements; but all forms of assessment of something as being correct or incorrect are conceptual. John McDowell is the most prominent advocate of such a view of social [35] practices (see in particular McDowell 1984 and 1994); Brandom (1994) can be read as being prepared to endorse such a view, too.

Recall that the point at issue is not an evolutionary story as to how human beings come to develop social practices. The point at issue is a systematic account of the function of social practices and how these practices relate to the natural world. There is no conclusive objection to the account of social practices under consideration from phylogenetic or ontogenetic evolution: As regards phylogenetic evolution, it is possible to maintain that normative

attitudes and intentional states – that is, states that have a conceptual content – are developed both at once and as a whole network of such states. As regards ontogenetic evolution, one can claim that children do not learn concepts one by one, but acquire a whole network of concepts together with normative attitudes at once, however rudimentary that network may at first be (compare the hint in Sellars 1997: §§ 19, 37).

Nevertheless, it may seem that the whole enterprise of explaining conceptual content becomes circular on the view under consideration: Semantics is traced back to pragmatics, but pragmatics is not possible without semantics, since any normative, pragmatic attitude involves conceptual content on this view. Thus, if we explain conceptual content by invoking normative attitudes, we refer to something that is itself conceptual. However, it is doubtful whether the circularity objection is conclusive: There are several theories of what conceptual content is. The theory that the conceptual content of our belief states consists in normative relations to other such states is one of these theories. We learn something when we are told that conceptual content consists in normative attitudes, and there can be a substantial dispute on whether or not that theory is right. What is refused is to trace back the normative attitudes, whose relations constitute conceptual content, to something that is not normative and not conceptual. However, it cannot be presupposed that conceptual content can be explained on the basis of something that has no conceptual content. Whether or [36] not such an explanation is possible is itself an issue of philosophical dispute. If such an explanation is not possible, it does not follow that nothing interesting can be said about conceptual content. Thus, even if the self-sufficiency view of social practices is in some sense circular, this fact as such is not an objection to it.

One can maintain that in order to be convincing this account of social practices should avoid two extreme poles: On the one hand, it should say more than just claiming and illustrating that any given sentence may mean different things in different situations so that there is no univocal meaning for any type of sentence or belief (such a tendency is manifest in, for instance, Travis 2000). Such a use theory of meaning gives up the whole project of a systematic account of meaning. It therefore runs the risk of no longer being able to enter into serious competition with other projects of a systematic theory of meaning such as naturalistic ones.

On the other hand, this account of social practices should avoid to become tied to a controversial metaphysics of the natural world. John McDowell (1994) claims in *Mind and World* that the view of the physical as something outside the normative and the conceptual is a misconception of modern science. The conceptual realm does not have any boundaries: it encompasses the physical – all those items our beliefs can be about. The conceptual content of those of our beliefs that are true is identical with the facts that make up the world (see in particular McDowell 1994: lecture 4). Brandom comes close to this position, too, when he proposes to identify facts with the conceptual content of true beliefs and then goes on to maintain that the world is a constellation of facts (1994: 333 and see also 622). According to McDowell, this position avoids any problem as to how our beliefs can be about the world (this problem is particularly acute in an inferential role semantics, as McDowell 1994 claims). Moreover, there is no problem as to how [37] normative attitudes can be integrated into the world: Since the conceptual and thus the normative realm has no boundaries, it is no bigger a problem how there can be normative facts than how there can be physical facts – in other words, it is no problem at all to admit normative facts.

However, apart from the issue how to make this conception of facts plausible (compare the criticism of Dodd 1995) and apart from the question whether there are good philosophical reasons to call for a partial reenchantment of nature (McDowell 1994: lecture 4), it seems that such a metaphysics of nature takes away from social practices the task for which they were introduced: If the conceptual content of our true beliefs is identical with the facts that make up the world, it seems that it remains for us as thinking beings only to receive these facts; but there seems to be no room for a spontaneous determination of conceptual content by social practices and thus for conceptual content originating in social practices. That is why one can object to McDowell that his position changes the topic from an account of conceptual content in terms of social practices to a new metaphysics of nature. Whatever the appropriate metaphysics of nature may be, accounting for conceptual content seems to be a task that falls within a theory of social practices given the framework under consideration in this paper.

To avoid these two extreme poles within a theory of meaning in terms of social practices that identifies the normative and the conceptual, one can take up Brandom's proposal to explicate conceptual content in terms of normative attitudes of taking people to be committed to, entitled to and precluded from being entitled to certain claims and actions. Brandom 1994 provides a number of concrete examples as to how conceptual content can be understood in this way, in particular the content of logical notions. One can receive this account in such a way that only those commitments, entitlements and precluded entitlements that are shared by a whole social community are constitutive of conceptual content. Basing oneself on these commitments, entitlements and precluded entitlements, it may prove feasible to work out a systematic theory [38] of meaning without meaning becoming diffused into commitments and entitlements that vary from person to person and from situation to situation. Furthermore, one may try to combine this approach with the Australian programme of conceptual analysis (see in particular Jackson 1998) insofar as the idea of this programme is to explain the content of common concepts in terms of the platitudes that people accept in employing these concepts and have to subscribe to in order to be counted as mastering the concepts in question. Working out such a position seems to me to be all that has to be done in order to make meaning intelligible within the conception under consideration.

There is no need to link this theory of meaning with the call for a revision of our view of the natural world. The problem that motivates such a call in McDowell does not arise in this conception. According to this position, conceptual content does not consist in free floating inferential relations; it consists in inferential relations insofar as these are determined by social practices in concrete situations of the application of the concepts in question; these practices are anchored in the physical world as is evident from the dependence of social practices on social behaviour as explained in section 2 above. Therefore, the objection that McDowell raises against an inferential semantics and that motivates his metaphysics of the conceptual realm being unbound does not apply to this position (compare Esfeld 2001: chapter 5).

As regards the wider scope of philosophy of mind, if one endorses global supervenience and the physical realization of intentional states, one may argue that these positions are sufficient in order to show how the realm of conceptual content and normative attitudes is integrated into the natural world. The possibility of a reduction of meaning to non-semantic and non-normative notions cannot be taken for granted, as has been argued above. Nonetheless, when it comes to the competition with naturalistic approaches to meaning, the

view of social practices sketched in this section – as well as the one sketched in the [39] preceding section – face the problem of mental causation. If it were not taken for granted that normative attitudes are causally relevant to behaviour, these views of social practices would be pointless. However, if intentional states enjoy a special status in that their description cannot be reduced to or derived from a description of physical states in naturalistic vocabulary, some sort of an account has to be given as to how intentional states can be causally relevant to physical states insofar as they are intentional or normative states, given that there is in principle a complete physical description of the causes of any physical state available; for, insofar as these states have causes at all, their causes can be completely described in physical vocabulary (for a recent, influential elaboration on that problem see Kim 1998).

5. *Summary and conclusion*

The main points and conclusions of this paper can be summed up in the following way:

1. There is no need for a theory of meaning in terms of social practices to oppose the mainstream position in today's philosophy of mind: Mental states, including intentional states, may supervene on the physical, taken globally, and they may have a physical realization. Endorsing global supervenience and physical realization of intentional states is sufficient in order to show how intentional states are integrated into the physical world, even if these states are essentially normative.
2. The main motivation for a theory of conceptual content in terms of social practices derives from the rule-following considerations, insofar as these considerations support a social use theory of meaning. This theory rejects drawing a distinction between belief states and propositions as the content bearing objects of belief states. Belief states are directly related to what they are about, and their content consists in relations to other [40] intentional states such as other belief states and actions; these relations are socially determined.
3. The semantics that this position implies is an inferential role semantics. However, the inferential relations among beliefs supervene on social, normative practices: they are determined by normative attitudes of taking people to be committed, entitled and precluded from being entitled to certain claims and actions; the description of inferential relations can in principle be reduced to a description of these normative attitudes.
4. Social practices are distinguished from mere social behaviour by normative attitudes. For social behaviour, a disposition to at least partial coordination of one's own behaviour with the behaviour of one's fellows is necessary and sufficient. Sanctions mark the transition from mere social behaviour to social practices: If sanctions in the sense of reinforcements or discouragements of certain forms of behaviour are a manifestation of normative attitudes of taking something to be correct or incorrect, then there are social practices in distinction to mere social behaviour.
5. Within this framework, one can differentiate between three conceptions of social practices. On what was introduced here as the first conception, the description of sanctions in the normative sense can be reduced to the description of sanctions in the naturalistic sense. The main task for this conception is to spell that possibility of reduction out in such a way that the Kripke-Wittgenstein objections to a straight, naturalistic solution to the problem of rule-following are avoided.

6. The two other conceptions regard social practices as having a special status in the sense that no reduction of the description of social practices to a description of social behaviour is possible. Nonetheless, one can conceive social practices as a bridge between the natural and the conceptual sphere by taking the normative to be of wider scope than the conceptual: the conceptual is a proper part of the normative. Thus, normative attitudes do not need to have conceptual [41] content. One then therefore derive conceptual content from normative attitudes. The main problem for this position is to make plausible how something can meet the criteria for being an irreducibly normative attitude without thereby fulfilling the criteria that are sufficient for something to have conceptual content. Furthermore, if normative attitudes are conceived as being such that their description cannot be reduced to a naturalistic description, it has to be explained how normative attitudes can nevertheless be causally relevant to behaviour insofar as they are normative.
7. If one maintains that the normative and the conceptual are identical, the task is to develop a substantial theory of meaning that makes clear how conceptual content can be construed in terms of normative attitudes that are themselves conceptual. Furthermore, the problem of mental causation arises for this view of social practices, too.

In sum, then, there are three types of conceiving social practices that are regarded as determining conceptual content. Which of these views, if any, is convincing depends on what progress will be made in solving the mentioned problems.

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Ph. D. Michael Esfeld (Berlin (Germany), 1966). Chair of Epistemology and Philosophy of Science, University of Lausanne, Department of Philosophy, CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland.

E-mail: Michael-Andreas.Esfeld@philo.unil.ch