Prolegomena to a Polanyian Theory of Practice
A Critique of Stephen Turner's Account

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Stephen Turner, *The Social Theory of Practices: Tradition, Tacit Knowledge, and Presuppositions.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. Pp. x + 145. ISBN 0-226-81737-7 (cloth), 81738-5 (paper).

ABSTRACT Key Words: Michael Polanyi, practices, traditions, social theory, tacit knowledge, sociological explanation, habits, social causes, presuppositions
Stephen Turner explores the social dimensions of practices, probing to see if the notion of a shared practice can be understood as a cause or mechanism whereby knowledge arises and is used. When he concludes that practices are not some mysterious collective object but are best explained as individual habits, he thereby rejects an attenuated notion of practice and replaces it with a needlessly atomistic notion in which habits carry the full burden of explanation. Turner makes use of aspects of Polanyi's thought, but this article suggests ways in which a fuller appropriation of Polanyian insights can salvage a social, telic notion of practices that illuminates human behavior.

The complete title of Stephen Turner's provocative book indicates accurately what the book is about. Practices, as Turner views them, encompass both social phenomena -- traditions -- and individual embodied states of mind -- tacit knowledge and presuppositions. *The Social Theory of Practices* attempts to ferret out the mechanisms by which knowledge utilizing practices are produced, shared and passed on -- are, in fact, social. Turner's overriding concern is to clarify the notion of practices so that its explanatory value in social science is illuminated.

The terrain Turner explores is broad indeed. "Practices" and its cognates have been used as explanatory terms in fields as diverse as philosophy, anthropology, history, psychology, and jurisprudence. In recent decades the concept of practices has become a leading candidate to fill the explanatory and justificatory vacuum created by the demise of most foundational theories in philosophy. In line with this philosophical development, Turner prefaces his first chapter with a citation from Wittgenstein and a paraphrase of Heidegger's thought. These citations illustrate how "practices" and allied social concepts have central prominence in the thought of the twentieth century's two most influential philosophers. Wittgenstein claims that socially mediated ideas provide the context within which serious thought occurs: "It is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false" (*On Certainty* , 15e). According to Hubert Dreyfus, "Heidegger argues that . . . even when people act deliberately, and so have beliefs, plans, follow rules, etc., their minds cannot be directed toward something except on a background of shared social practices" (*Tines Literary Supplement* , July 12, 1991, 25).

Granted that many disciplines utilize the term "practices," what does Turner mean by this notion? He recognizes two distinct meanings. One is the "telic notion of practice" (8); the other is a causal notion.

He explains the telic notion through a definition given by Kant: it is "an activity seeking a goal 'which is conceived as a result of following certain general principles of procedure'" (8, quoting from Kant's "This

May Be True in Theory but Does not Apply to Practice"). Telic definitions have their origin in Aristotle, and currently MacIntyre and Borgmann are examples of thinkers using this notion. It is not difficult to identify examples of telic practices. These would qualify: playing a game of chess, hosting an annual New Year's Eve party, baptizing a baby according to the way it is done in some denomination, sitting in on a jam session, going fly fishing.

Turner, alas, does not investigate telic practices. Rather, in the first five of his six chapters he examines practices insofar as they might function as foundational (causal) explanations in social science. He inquires as to whether practices can explain and justify claims to knowledge and truth.

When he explores practices in this causal sense, he finds usages that tend to cluster around two basic modes: "those that are based on the model of hidden premisses of deductive theories, 'shared presuppositions', and those that refer to embodied knowledge, such as skills, ingrained cultural or moral dispositions, or linguistic competencies" (3).

The second mode of causal practices, embodied knowledge, is influenced by Polanyi's notion of tacit knowledge. In part, Polanyi's notion is attractive because it "trades on the interdependence of skill and presupposition that is part of the scientist's way" (3). Unfortunately, there are many Polanyian insights that Turner ignores to the detriment of his book's cogency, insights which would have helped Turner detour around the rough road that faces anyone who attempts to envision practice as a collective, causal sort of explanation of human behavior. To understand how Polanyian conceptuality might be helpful, let us first see how Turner carries out his investigation.

When Turner sets aside the telic notion of practice to concentrate upon the extent to which practices might contribute to causal comprehension, he sets himself upon a course which inevitably leads to disappointment. Seduced by the allure of sociology in the grand tradition of Durkheim, he falls prey to an objectivist model of social science. Actually, Turner's set of presuppositions about what makes for good sociological explanation seems even more closely modeled on the physical sciences than the notions of Durkheim. Ironically enough, Turner's dissatisfaction with the notion of "practices" is generated by the sociological *practice* he applies to the notion. Here is my reading of five presuppositions governing the sociological practice he embraces in the first five chapters of his book, presuppositions which inevitably lead to dissatisfaction with any viable notion of practice.

First, Turner assumes that the proper goal of sociological theorizing is to take note of the empirical evidence of human life patterns in their social and individual forms and explain the regular patterns as well as account for the anomalies. With this basic assumption, I have no quarrels whatsoever, so long as explanation and accounting are carried out in manners appropriate to the evidence being studied.

Second, Turner assumes that the only really reliable explanations are those discovered in the empirical evidence. Explanations which are in some way constructed are tainted with subjectivity. Behind this assumption is a belief that what is discovered is objective and therefore reliable, whereas what is postulated or regulative is unreliable. This belief about the nature of truth is evident in the following passage:

> Aren't facts about practice just 'made' facts as well? If so, isn't the story that social constructionists tell itself [sic] just another story about the facts being 'made' by scientists,

law courts and the like -- and not the 'true' story? (38)

To assume that there is one true account of practice is, of course, highly contentious, and the way he relies on empirical evidence places Turner--against his own inclinations, I believe--in the camp of behaviorists. Understandably, Turner wishes to avoid relativism if possible, but to resort to a behavioristic model of truth is to narrow seriously the notion of evidence to measurable public evidence and the notion of explanation to a form of nominalism.

Third, Turner assumes that causal social arguments require that selfsame causal objects be shown to act in the same way over time and across cultures. The requirement that a practice must be consistently the same, a requirement apparently borrowed from the structure of law in physics, haunts Turner's analysis in the first five chapters.

Fourth, Turner assumes that causes must be conceived as objects which impinge on other objects. This assumption, of course, is but an implication of the second and third assumptions just noted. Still the idea that objectivity requires objects is pervasive in what he writes and is worthy of being regarded as one of a cluster of logically related assumptions, what might be termed his "objectivity requirement." How can he connect his objectivity requirement to a causal notion of practices which is grounded in such apparently nonobjective phenomena as either "hidden *premisses*" or types of embodied *knowledge* (my emphases)?

Fifth, Turner assumes, reluctantly, that if an explanation cannot be based directly on empirical evidence, then the inference to a hidden causal object is required. When the causal processes are not independently observable, one is required to accept inference to the best explanation (1 8), an inherently weaker theory than a behaviorist theory.

The problem with the assumptions Turner accepts is that they are inappropriately modeled after the physical sciences. Obviously, human intentions and actions are responsive to a vast number of influences, including those lumped together under the elusive notion of freedom as well as those which are observable. The notion of lawlike (causal) behavior is in itself appropriate to borrow from the natural sciences (including biology) so long as its explanatory limits are observed.

To the extent that a causal explanation of practices is warranted, Turner's usage of the notion of cause is flawed. His usage seems more patterned upon mechanics rather than upon quantum mechanics. But all the elements in a mechanical system are in principle observable. This is not the case with the causes of human behavior (assuming it is even appropriate to speak of causes of human behavior). Any theory of human behavior which settles just for some simple causal influences, whether it be genetic inheritance, environmental influence or free decision making, is doomed to failure. The complexity of influences suggests human causality be at best considered as analogous to quantum mechanical explanation. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle does not abandon the principle of causality; rather it recognizes formulaically the limits of human knowledge and does not attempt greater objective knowledge than is possible in the microworld. The paths (positions and velocities) of photons must be understood in terms of probabilities. Similarly, even if Turner developed a precise, empirically grounded definition of practices, the incredible number of variables affecting human behavior would render causal explanation and accurate prediction impossible. The most that might be expected would be a probabilistic analysis.

But, understandably enough, Turner is never able to offer a precise, empirically grounded definition of practices. The four middle chapters of the book show how sociology shaped by the five assumptions listed above cannot produce a satisfactory notion of practice. The questions Turner raises about any putative concepts of practice are many. "How does one distinguish first, or human, nature and second nature, or practice?" (21) How can one confidently select among the various historical accounts of how we acquire patterns of behavior so impervious to change that they may be identified as practices (27)? How does one know that practices are not "as if" explanations rather than causal explanations (43)? Where is the location of practices: in some collective object? in individual habits? in some form that is both private and public (50)? Are practices best understood as commonly possessed tacit objects, rules that govern behavior, or merely personal habits (63-77)? If practices refer to basically stable patterns of behavior, how is one to understand how practices change so as not undermine their essential stability (83-92)? Can one meaningfully distinguish between such cognate terms as practice, form of life, tradition, custom, mores, habitus, paradigm, etc. (93)?

In following the assumptions of objective sociology, Turner conceives practices as hidden convictions or habits shared by a group. Here he follows a trail blazed by Freud rather than by Heisenberg. The group practices that Turner discusses seem ontologically congruent with the individual unconscious that Freud discusses. Both are nonempirical constructs postulated to account for observed phenomena. Turner is scrupulous in tracking the problems such fundamentally metaphysical notions (or at best regulative ideas) raise for science. He is well aware that these notions cannot in principle be falsified. His conclusion is, therefore, not surprising:

> I think the case for practices, or practice, understood as a hidden collective object, is faced with such serious difficulties with respect to the means of the transmission and acquisition of these objects that it cannot be accepted, and that appeals to 'practice' used in this sense, either in philosophy or social theory, are therefore appeals to nothing. (100)

Turner consequently reaches the end of his protracted road toward the destination of objective sociology without having been able to collect any cargo of causal insights. Indeed, the results of his journey read more like an exercise in the deconstruction of "practices" (although Turner's sympathies are certainly not with postmodernism) than like the constructive clarification of this term. Moreover, the road he traveled proves to be full of detours and bogs, and the destination he sought seems nebulous and lost in airy abstraction. The concept of practice, whether it is conceived cognitively, as a kind of presupposition, or causally, as a kind of mental trace which disposes thought or action in a certain way, is epistemically elusive. Practices are not directly accessible, and the means of accessing them indirectly are fraught with difficulties, of which underdetermination is the most obvious and pervasive. (43)

In his last chapter Turner settles for an instrumental, individually grounded notion of practice rather than a causal, shared notion.

> We cannot do anything to get behind the notion of practice, either in a causal or a justificatory way, because practices are not objects, but are rather explanatory constructions that solve specific problems of comparison and unmet expectations.... We cannot identify practices as such. We cannot even separate the 'social' part of practice from the natural part. (123)

His tone throughout the chapter makes it evident that this modest sort of conclusion comes as a disappointment to Turner. One cannot identify practices in such a way as to defeat relativism, justify claims, or perform other such heroic deeds for our culture as Turner originally hoped. But is the problem with the notion of practice? Isn't the problem rather with the inflated dreams of social science modeled on physical science? What was most surprising to me as I read through *The Social Theory of Practices* was that Stephen Turner, obviously a well read and thoughtful practitioner (that term!) of social theory, a man who acknowledges his appreciation for the works of Gadamer, MacIntyre, and Rorty in addition to Polanyi, would be transfixed by these dreams.

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How might Polanyian conceptuality have been helpful to Turner? First, a person influenced by Polanyi's epistemology would not be likely to be lured into the objectivist assumptions that marked Turner's project. Since Polanyi demonstrated the illusory aspect of objectivist ideals in the physical sciences, how much less likely it is that objectivist ideals could be sustained in the social sciences! Turner's work, perhaps inadvertently, functions as an object lesson to anyone who would embark on an objectivist definition and description of practices.

Second, a Polanyian perspective would find much of interest in the telic notion of practice that Turner initially discarded. For Polanyi, all acts of knowing have some degree of personal purpose — commitment — embedded within them. While Turner does not explicitly state that the modest notion of practices he discusses in his last chapter represents a return to the telic notion he earlier dismissed, in fact that seems to be the direction toward which his thought is tending.

Unfortunately, he never quite shakes free of his objectivist leanings. Instead, Turner concludes that practices "are individual formations of habit that are the condition for the performances and emulations that make up life" (123). There is a problematic nostalgia for causality (objectivity) that clings to this reductionistic formulation. Practices are not helpfully seen as collections of habits which are *the condition for* (awfully close to "cause") performances and emulations. Performances and emulations are of many sorts and may be produced for many reasons. Practices are best regarded as one type of performance or emulation, namely that type carried out according to standards of excellence set forth in traditions of interpretation. Both the performance and the commitment to communal standards of excellence are required if one is to talk meaningfully of a practice. A Polanyian would reject Turner's concluding reduction of practices to individual habits. In place of such arbitrary atomism, a Polanyian would insist that practices exhibit social structure and telic qualities.

Third, a Polanyian analysis of human behavior would resist temptations to speak of causes. "A complete causal interpretation of man and human affairs disintegrates all rational grounds on which man can hold convictions and act on these convictions. It leaves you with a picture of human affairs construed in terms of appetites, checked only by fear" (*Logic of Liberty*, 28). Polanyi notes that all living beings have active centers in which multiple influences are coordinated, and in humans these centers are developed to the extent that genuine autonomous behavior emerges (see *PK*, 402-495). Autonomous behavior takes account of background influences but is not simply the product of their vectorial impact. Practices are ways humans insulate themselves from random environmental influences; through practices people organize, coordinate and focus behavior so as to increase the scope and weight of action.

This implies, fourth, that the chief significance of practices is not to be found, as Turner assumes, in their explanatory power, but rather it rests in their ability to illuminate meaning producing social and personal acts. MacIntyre and Borgmann, rather than Polanyi, have most tellingly seized upon this characteristic of practice and developed its implications. MacIntyre defines a practice as "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity" (*After Virtue*, 175). A person engaging in a practice is *guided* by its standards rather than being *caused* to perform in some manner.

Albert Borgmann inquires after those practices which especially orient and enrich life. He calls them focal practices. By searching out the focal practices that call and claim us, we can guard against the frittering away of time and energy that occurs when we assume "that the shaping of our lives can be left to a series of individual decisions. . . [W]ithout a practice an engaging action or event can momentarily light up our life, but it cannot order and orient it focally" (*Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, 206-207). Focal practices typically connect persons with those things in the world that evoke effort and care because they have weight and depth. To speak less metaphorically, focal practices include such activities as backpacking in the wilderness, participating regularly in a book discussion group, or cooking gourmet meals. Borgmann's attention to the life enhancing qualities of practices is most effectively carried out in the language not of the social scientist, but in terms of what he calls deictic discourse, language of testimony and appeal.

Fifth, one of the means of transmission of practices is through deictic discourse. But people find practices attractive for a variety of reasons. In his "special moments" section (63-67), Turner explains some of the mechanisms by which practices are passed on. People learn the rules (67-76) of a practice in a variety of ways, often indwelling them so they are carried out automatically (habitually). In asking his readers to choose between understanding practices in terms of "rules, social minds *or* habits" (76, my emphasis), Turner seems unnecessarily to pose disjunctive alternatives. A Polanyian approach would be to affirm the usefulness of understanding practices in terms of each alternative at some partial level of analysis. Practitioners die, but as long as a practice continues to elicit interest, new practitioners will identify with its goals and take responsibility for ensuring that its standards are maintained.

Polanyi's thought can be mined to provide examples of such processes. For instance, *Science, Faith and Society* explains how the practice of science is grounded in a community of inquirers, passionately seeking intellectual satisfaction and committed to common standards of research and review. Typically, persons engaged in a practice have a convivial relationship to one another. Indeed, such essential Polanyian terms as connoisseurship, commitment, conviviality and meaning serve well to describe the dynamics of engaging in practices. These terms of social engagement seem to me more useful in comprehending practices than the notion Turner emphasizes from Polanyi, tacit knowing. Much that is central to a practice is explicitly known.

In conclusion, Stephen Turner's book provides much material of interest to anyone pursuing the topic of practices. The outcome of his labor would be more satisfying had he incorporated into his thought the sensitivities of Michael Polanyi.